

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

AND THE
SQUIRE'S
CRYSTAL



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Jacqueline Rayner

**BIG
FINISH**

Legend tells of an evil sorceress who used the power of magical crystals to transfer her mind into the bodies of others. Her reign of terror was long and bloody, and her final defeat the cause of great rejoicing.

But that's just a legend. A story told to children. Isn't it? I mean, it's ridiculous. It couldn't have really happened... could it?

Finding the last resting place of the Crystal Sorceress is an archaeological dream on a par with discovering the Holy Grail. So it's hardly likely that someone will just offer the solution to Professor Bernice Summerfield on a plate.

But sometimes the unlikely actually happens. And one thing that's very, very unlikely is that Benny will suddenly find herself to be a member of the opposite gender...

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Cat Flap

The door was almost as impressive as the red-silk-lined wall in which it was placed. Deep, rich wood that produced a booming sound as a fist pounded on it. Carved panels showing scenes that the person knocking couldn't quite figure out, but thought (hoped) that they had something to do with archaeology.

Almost as impressive. But not quite. For two reasons. One, the handwritten note which had been stabbed on the doorhandle, reading: GOT TO BED 6AM DO NOT DISTURB

UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES EVEN MURDER. The other, the foot-square hole inexpertly sawed out of the lowest panel.

It was now 9 a.m. exactly.

A large tabby-coloured animal (small, feline) poked its head out of the hole and idly directed its gaze up at the thoughtless creature that had disturbed its rest. In the manner of one completely confident in its home territory, but nevertheless wishing to let the obvious enemy (large, canine) know where it stood, the cat narrowed its eyes and hissed warningly. After a few seconds (to prove that he, the cat, was not intimidated, but the caller was just not worth the effort of a prolonged show of displeasure), the cat retreated.

Actually, the cat and the caller rather liked each other. But appearances had to be maintained.

The caller knocked again.

Ten minutes later, he knocked again.

Seven and a half minutes later, the door opened. A tall, short-haired woman stood in the doorway, still tying the belt of a blue towelling robe. She yawned pointedly and gave the caller an especially hard stare. 'What do you want, Adrian? It'd better be at least mass genocide.'

Adrian growled, and held up a small plastic device with an air of distaste. 'I've come to fit your cat flap, Professor Summerfield.'

* * *

Benny had been having a marvellous dream. She couldn't remember all the details now, but she knew it had had a lot of chocolate in it. And Jason. And now she had been dragged back to stupid old real life to argue with a seven-foot-tall Killoran with a screwdriver who was inside her study.

'As I *obviously* didn't want to be disturbed because Caitlin's hen-

night *obviously* went on until, well, not very long ago, and as you can *obviously* see where the cat flap is meant to go, was there any good reason at all for you to wake me up?’

Adrian bared his fangs. ‘I needed to be this side of the door.’

‘The door wasn’t locked.’

‘I would not enter a lady’s – or even your – rooms without permission, *Professor*.’

Benny wracked her sleepy brain for a witty comeback. ‘Oh, ha ha,’ she decided on after about thirty seconds. ‘Anyway, what in the name of goodness are you doing carrying out small domestic maintenance jobs? Cot tired of the construction business and decided to set up as general handybeing instead?’

A long, mean growl from deep in Adrian’s throat. ‘Ms Jones said it was urgent,’ he spat. ‘There was no one else available.’

Benny grinned. If he had encountered Ms Jones, that basically counted as a sort of pre-emptive revenge. Knowing that Adrian Wall’s morning had been ruined too made her feel a lot better. And Wolsey really did need a proper cat flap fitted quite urgently; he kept getting splinters. She left the wolfman to ‘carry on the good work’ (major growl at that one) and went off to grind coffee beans.

Three large cups of coffee and a hot shower later, Benny was marginally closer to alertness, and went to check her messages.

One lecture request (a possible yes; the college was known to put on a good buffet afterwards), three ways to triple her income (three times nothing is...?), a message from Brax saying he’d be gone another three days and would she please remember to feed his Dyamon dagger-fish, and a vid-mail from an unknown address. Click on ‘access’. Nearly fall off chair.

Thirty-five-ish (sort of), married, divorced, hurt terribly numerous times, yet Bernice was still a sucker for a boyish grin and a floppy blond fringe.

‘Hi,’ the grin said.

‘(Hi,’ sighed Benny to the screen.)

‘You don’t know me – well, you’ve probably worked that out for yourself –’ (sheepish upwards look through fringe) – ‘but I’ve heard a lot about you, and I’d really like to ask your advice. Well, your help, really. Oh, my name’s Dominic, by the way. The thing is... have you ever heard of the Soul-Sucker? Only I – well, I think I’ve... found her.’

Benny *had* heard of the Soul-Sucker. She would be surprised if any archaeologist hadn’t. It was one of those things, like the Holy Grail or Atlantis or the last resting place of King Arthur, that everyone knew about and everyone wanted to find, even though they weren’t quite sure if they’d ever really existed in the first place. Benny had even

seen a children's picture book about it, the legend told in words of two syllables or less: *The Adventure of the Crystal Cavern*. The Soul-Sucker had been pictured as a terrifying woman with an explosion of red hair, and a penchant for purple and gold robes – which rather missed the point of the whole story, which was that she spent her life swapping from one body to another. Perhaps the editor had thought it would confuse children to see a different image on each page. Avril, her name had been – although Benny had read sources in which it had been April, or Avinal, or Arvin. She had been squire to a Knight of the Rowan – a revered but now defunct (as far as Benny knew) order of female paladins. Avril (let's call her that for convenience, it's a nice name anyway) had been with her Knight when she – Avril or the Knight, no one was quite sure – had discovered a cave full of crystals (the eponymous Crystal Cavern). The Knight had been killed somehow, and when Avril escaped she was charged with dishonourably abandoning her, and sentenced to death. But she'd had one of these crystals with her, which turned out to be magic (well, let's call it magic, although there's bound to be a really good scientific explanation) and at her execution she managed to use it to swap bodies with her executioner and escape (although not before cutting off the unfortunate woman's head). Then she began a reign of notoriety, killing off the rest of the Order of the Rowan and generally being bad; always using the power of the crystal to escape justice – until one day her lair was discovered and a booby trap set, and her body sealed for ever in this secret location, crystal and all. No one was allowed near, in fear that she'd somehow cheated death and would use the crystal to nick another body and rain terror on the land once again. So – if it were true – somewhere, in some sealed underground vault on an unknown planet, the body of Soul-Sucker and sometime squire Avril was to be found. With the crystal. And this – well, little more than a boy really, let's not get excited by calling him a man – claimed to have found her. A discovery that would put you up there with Howard Carter or Xadiver Poushquon. And he wanted her, Benny, to share in it. 'It' being the discovery, not anything else that two consenting adults might be able to share, of course.

Gosh.

Having arranged that Ms Jones would feed both Wolsey and Brax's Dyamon dagger-fish, Benny spent three minutes packing a rucksack, and then shaved her legs, just in case.

Hera, from where Dominic had called her, was one of the nearest planets to the Braxiatel Collection, and so only a short shuttle journey away. Not near enough to be there and back in a few hours (hence the rucksack), but long enough to read a relatively short book from end to

end. Benny had a quick scoot around the library, and chose *The Adventure of the Crystal Cavern*. Well, it would get her in the mood. In the mood for archaeology and crystals and caves, that is, and *nothing else whatever*. Honestly.

Five minutes before the shuttle came in to land on Hera, she nipped into the loos and put on some lipstick.

Dominic was waiting for her in the concourse. Rucksack slung casually over her shoulder, Benny strode across to him, determined to display a thoroughly professional attitude and not flutter her eyelids. She noticed she was holding in her stomach, and let it out. Then thought better of it and sucked it in again. That also had the benefit of shoving her chest out and making it look like she had, ooh, at least a 36B chest, instead of a 34 double-A.

The guy was even better in real life. Tall. Blond. Slim, but with just the right amount of muscle and every inch – every inch she could see, *bad* Benny – was firm with not even a hint of flabbiness. Dark eyes. Perfect skin, not a blemish in sight.

Straight nose with just the tiniest upturn at the end. If a man could be beautiful, he was.

Strangely, it was at the exact moment that Benny decided Dominic was beautiful that she felt the first flicker of doubt about him.

She held out her hand. ‘Hi,’ she said. ‘I’m Professor Summerfield. Benny.’

He grinned down at her five foot nine from his six foot three.

‘I’m very pleased to meet you,’ he said, taking the hand (grip not too hard or too soft, and no sweaty palms). ‘I’m Dominic. Well, obviously. Um, there’s a nice bar in the port lounge. We could go there and I’ll explain everything to you over a drink. Is that okay?’

Benny grinned.

Dominic had an orange juice, Benny had an orange juice with vodka. She didn’t ask if he didn’t drink/was driving/it was too early in the day. It was none of her business.

He began to explain everything to her.

I work for Arsine De Vallen. You’ve probably heard of him. He’s a billionaire – actually probably a trillionaire, at least. Doesn’t get on too well with your Irving Braxiatel, as he’s rather a collector too, and there’s been a bit of rivalry in the past. De Vallen’s a Heran through and through, and is especially interested in artefacts and documents relating to Hera’s past. I’m his archivist, I catalogue the various manuscripts he picks up. Anyway, I don’t know how much you know about Hera? It’s quite an up-and-coming planet at the moment; we were a little bit – yes, backward; don’t be embarrassed, it’s true. There have been civilisations here for centuries, but as far as we knew they were more or less pre-technological –

wheel, fire and so on, but no traction engines or space flight.

We were wrong, though. And not just about the traction engines.

I've always been fascinated by the legend of the Soul-Sucker. A lot of people are convinced that she lived on Hera – although I expect you know all about that, an expert like yourself. No, no, you're just being modest, I'm sure. But that's not the only reason it interested me. The idea of someone giving up their own body –

it drew me in because it repelled me so. You'd be giving up your identity – all that you are. I can't understand that. Oh, I know she supposedly did it to save her life – but then she followed it through by cutting off her own head! Her own head! Cutting off your head to spite your face... Yes, you're right, she obviously was – well, shall we say 'under a lot of mental pressure' rather than

'completely doolally'?

De Vallen was one of those people convinced that Avril Fenman was a Heran. He set up expeditions and geological surveys hoping to find the Crystal Cavern – her lair – anything. But he found nothing that was conclusive – about that, anyway. He found other things. I'll come to that in a moment.

Anyway, because of De Vallen's interest and my own, I'd extensively studied all the documents relating to the Soul-Sucker.

One of them was what appeared to be the diary of the sister of Sir Cherry, the Knight of the Rowan to whom Avril Fenman was squire. In the light of the discovery I've put it through a new translation programme. Very rough, but interesting. I'll show you the results in a minute.

What discovery? Ah, now we come to the main business. What would you say if I told you that De Vallen's excavations last year have proved beyond all shadow of a doubt that the Dark Ages of Hera did have space travel capabilities after all?

Benny stared at him in disbelief. 'You're joking.'

He grinned. 'My first reaction too. It's true, I assure you. Oh, their space flight was very rudimentary, but it definitely happened.'

'But what's that got to do with the Soul-Sucker legend thingy?'

'You know the sort of society she supposedly lived in? Mediaeval type, a strong sense of chivalry and justice and ultimate good and evil. Not quite a feudal system, but they did believe in the strong protecting the weak. It was Avril Fenman's betrayal of her knight – and her vows – that upset them almost as much as the havoc she went on to wreak. She'd gone over to the dark side, so to speak, you see, and that was the scariest thing they could imagine. The society had to be rid of her at all costs.

'I believe they chased her off the planet. She got away to another, an uninhabited rock, and it's possible she came back to Hera once or twice. In the end, they pursued her to her base and shot down her

craft. They undoubtedly hoped she was killed too, but such was the terror she inspired, no one was going to go down there and check. It didn't matter anyway – if not dead, she was marooned. She wouldn't bother them again. At least... They couldn't risk it. Oh, you must understand that – as far as we can now tell – they had no knowledge of life on other planets. Their space travel was purely a quest for resources. Well, resources didn't mean anything next to the moral wellbeing of the planet. They destroyed every space vehicle, every hint of technology. In the event of Avril having survived, no one would ever be able to release her from her prison planet.'

Benny was wide-eyed. 'That's taking fanaticism to a whole new level.'

'True,' Dominic agreed. 'But it's a sort of noble stupidity, don't you think?'

Benny didn't answer that. 'Well, obviously I appreciate you keeping me up to date with the latest archaeological developments,' she said, 'but if you think you've found her location – and as it's your specialist subject – and you work for a bloke with unlimited resources and a hot shot archaeological team – what on Earth do you want *my* advice for?'

Dominic pulled a few sheets of printout from his pocket. 'By the time we'd assessed all these new factors, I was more convinced than ever that the Soul-Sucker came from Hera. You know how Heinrich Schliemann finally discovered Troy, hundreds of years after it had been condemned as a myth, through rereading Homer and collating all the geographical clues? Well, I felt that if I could just do the same... I went through this diary again and again, now armed with the knowledge about space travel. And I found just one coincidence too many. I know where her lair is.' He held up the papers. 'This is the translation,' he said. 'Sorry, it's very crude. But I think you'll understand once you've read it.'

Benny took the sheaf from him and began to read.

Day 37 of Low Sun Season.

The birthday it would have been of my sister, red fruit of the red fruit, (highlighted note: ??? woman unlikely to be related to a strawberry. However source originates on planet Hera, home to the Knights of the Rowan. Rowan = tree with red berries, originating on Earth. So sister may have been a Knight. But why RF *of the* RF? Could be indication of Knight's given name? Research suggests list of red fruit. Only one commonly used as given name – "Cherry", a small red or black fruit originating on Earth. Earth-based software would explain confusion in translation. Not unusual name, but there is one famous example...) **had she not have been struck down by the <woman-magic?sorceress?witch> the evil Squire. Yet us not**

rest in sleep until found is <woman-magic? sorceress?witch> and red fruit is avenged, with all others of victim to evil Squire with transparent rock> (highlighted note: suggest crystal. Avril Fenman, squire to Cherry of the Rowan, otherwise known as the 'Crystal Sorceress' or 'Soul-Sucker'). <Planet?world> of ours we have searched all. (highlighted note: previous translations/ annotations assumed this to be merely a reference to all known territory. Further research suggests otherwise – see below.) She is here not of any. But man-mate (highlighted note: husband) and all elders have discovered in search vehicle of old-time, one of more? And to other <planet?world> flyer is. (Again, previous sources assume this is a reference to a trip to another city/area, further away than the people would usually travel. But now...) Evil Squire too must know, they say, and more flyer has she. To other <planet?world> goes she, and back here for her sport. Not much of <sky?space?atmosphere> flyer can fly. Small <planet?world> of nearby is home man-mate say, of size no more than <Vonicia?no suggestion> lake from side to side, (highlighted note: large lake on planet Hera, but probably exaggeration. Nevertheless, suggest refers to extremely small astral body within reasonable distance of Hera.)

There was more, and Benny skimmed it with an expert eye.

Then she read it through again, more closely. She looked up at Dominic, looked at the pages again, and looked up at Dominic again. 'You think the Soul-Sucker's lair is on the Braxiatel Collection, don't you.'

'Yes,' he replied. 'I'm certain of it.'

They'd been talking the thing over for two hours. Benny could quite see why Dominic had jumped to the conclusion that the Soul-Sucker's last resting place was the Braxiatel Collection, and she also understood (although this was not something they'd discussed) that that was why he'd contacted her – as archaeologist on the spot, not as renowned expert, still less as hot babe he was desperate to meet. The trouble was, much as she'd like to believe that the solution to a centuries-old mystery was in her backyard, she just couldn't. As she explained to Dominic, Irving Braxiatel had commissioned extensive geological surveys of the planetoid before starting the Collection, none of which had revealed anything out of the ordinary at all. Brax certainly wasn't the kind of guy who'd risk ruining anything of archaeological value. As far as they could tell, the planetoid had always been uninhabited; there was not a trace of occupation – and certainly not of any ancient exploded spaceships. And with all the building work going on, they'd have been bound to uncover anything that was there by now, even if

by some freak all the surveys were incorrect.

‘The building work’s not finished yet, though, is it?’ Dominic had asked. And Benny had agreed that it wasn’t. In the end she’d also agreed that, however slim a chance it was, he was right that they couldn’t afford not to investigate. Because otherwise they’d both be wondering for ever.

Of course, as it turned out, wondering for ever would have been a better option for both of them.

Without even having undone the buckle of her rucksack, Benny found herself back on a shuttle to the Braxiatel Collection. The sooner this was sorted, the better. She pictured Dominic in her mind, as he’d been at the moment she’d agreed to his plan. In retrospect, the gleam of triumph in his eyes didn’t seem that of a man sensing academic fulfilment, but something much more sinister.

That was her second feeling of distrust against Dominic.

Unfortunately for her, she decided she was just being paranoid because of all the times the sweet, cute guy who wanted her help had turned out to be a villain who wanted her dead.

Therefore, by the time she had got home, she had dismissed those feelings.

Satisfaction Guaranteed

The most difficult part was to get Dominic permission to visit the Braxiatel Collection. Benny got on with Ms Jones better than anyone else on the planetoid did, but rules, as Ms Jones said, were rules, and this Dominic didn't qualify for a visitor's pass even if he did think he'd discovered the greatest secret of the modern age and where was the proof of that anyway?

Benny explained that when she had accepted Irving Braxiatel's exceptionally kind invitation to be his permanent guest and archaeology expert, she hadn't realised it meant she wasn't allowed visitors ever and why didn't Ms Jones look at this playback of Dominic's vid-phone message. Unfortunately the message seemed to have become corrupted and the visual was nothing but static, but Ms Jones listened to Dominic's voice, and Benny's description, and agreed that it would indeed be extremely unfair for Professor Summerfield not to be allowed visitors ever. Benny left the office with a visitor's pass.

Lying in her bed that night, trying to distract herself from various disturbing but strangely enjoyable thoughts that for once didn't involve her ex-husband in any way, Benny's eye caught the picture book sticking out of her rucksack. She jumped up and pulled out the book, because if she just left it there she'd forget it and then one of the librarians would tell Ms Jones that Benny hadn't returned what she'd borrowed, and that was worse than a fine any day.

She flicked idly through the book again. Page two: how Cherry of the Rowan and her squire, Avril, had found themselves in a mysterious cave system underground. (Page three: illustration of tall blonde woman and sneaky-looking redhead entering a cave.) Page four: how Avril wandered off against the advice of her knight, who was then attacked by monsters. (Page five: illustration of ratty-goblin things surrounding the tall blonde woman, redhead fleeing – not that that was even part of the story.) Page six: how Avril wandered into a cavern full of crystals. (Page seven: illustration of crystal cavern.) Page eight: how Cherry was screaming for help and Avril had to choose between the crystals and returning to save her knight. (Page eight: illustration of redhead rubbing her hands greedily.) Page nine: how Avril chose the crystals. (Page ten: illustration of the blood-soaked corpse of Cherry, surrounded by evil goblins.) Page eleven: how Avril escaped but was captured by the other knights. (Page twelve: redhead

with her head on the block, axe poised above her.) Page thirteen, unlucky for some: how Avril used the crystal to swap bodies with her executioner, and how she brought down the axe on her own neck so no one would know. (Page fourteen: illustration of a severed head lying in a pool of red hair and blood, its eyes staring horrifically, sightlessly ahead...) Benny slammed the book closed in disgust. Honestly, were the editors trying to give children nightmares? If she ever had offspring she would read them nothing but improving books; no blood-soaked alleged morality tales leading to bed-wetting for *her* children, thank you very much.

And then she realised what she was thinking, and had to laugh. Bernice the mother. Goddess, that was something that was never going to happen...

Chuckling to herself, she threw the closed book on to the bedside rug, and fell asleep within a couple of minutes. But she dreamed about Dominic.

It was two days later and quite late in the evening, and Benny had been hanging around the shuttle bay for half an hour trying to look nonchalantly as if she'd just turned up, when Dominic finally arrived. She watched him disembark – tall, lean and graceful, a leather bag over one shoulder – and wandered over to greet him.

‘Hi,’ she said. He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

Taken aback by the unexpected contact, she drew back slightly – and then smiled broadly to hide her embarrassment at that.

‘Um, you did get your security pass, didn’t you? It’s got to be checked, I’m afraid. You can’t go anywhere without it, and they won’t let you back on the shuttle without it either.’

Dominic pulled his bag round in front of him, and rummaged in the pockets to produce a small pink plastic disk.

‘One security pass.’ He gestured back towards the lemon-yellow craft he’d just left. ‘And they checked it when I boarded the shuttle, during the journey, and before I got off, anyway.’

He put it back in the bag. ‘Where do we go from here? It’s a bit late to get the trowels out, isn’t it?’

Benny thought for about two seconds. ‘Have you eaten? Do you like pasta?’

‘Love it. And I’m starving.’

‘Me too. Then we’ll talk over dinner. Come on, let’s get your pass checked.’

It seemed to Benny that Ms Jones took an unconscionably long time to process Dominic’s pass. She also did not previously recall it being a necessary condition of entry for visitors to have their biodata checked quite so closely. Especially shirtless.

Though she had to admit he looked pretty damn cool standing there, with a jet-black pendant lying against his chest emphasising just how smooth and pale his skin was. Not like Jason, who was one of the hairy-chested sort.

Oh, what was she thinking, comparing this beautiful stranger to her ex-hubby? Two big no-nos: one, thinking of Dominic like that, and two... thinking of Jason like that. Have to move on, Bernice. But how did you move on from an obsession?

Jason aversion therapy? Lie on a couch and get Brax to put on a German accent and give her an electric shock every time she looked at her wedding photos?

Can't live with, can't live without. Cliches only became cliches because they were true. Except the 'living without' bit was in many ways easier because of having her own space and no horrific rows and less hair clogging up the plughole and the toilet seat always being down and not finding stray toenail clippings in bed...

...and no shoulder to cry on and incredible sex and curling up together in front of an open fire...

But if Jason were back she knew they'd be doing the row thing and maybe the sex thing but none of the calm, comfortable, two people together for ever thing that couples were supposed to grow into. Or they'd be at different ends of the galaxy with different people, never thinking about each other. She was only obsessed with Jason because she couldn't have him, and if he were back and they were together, her life would be hell.

And, she realised as she caught a glimpse of the shirtless Dominic (now having his inner leg measured by Ms Jones) she was clinging on to Jason so she could use him as a safety net.

She could do all the fab stuff, all that falling for someone, looks across a crowded room, will-they-won't-they, accidental touches and intense first kisses – things you weren't supposed to do while you were with someone. But she always had Jason to fall back on. If things went wrong, or they didn't want her, or she was just feeling unloved, she'd know that she had her perfect partner, she was one half of an eternal couple; it was just that the other half didn't happen to be around right now.

And, of course, if someone hit on her and she wasn't up for it, she could tell them with no hint of a lie that she was spoken for.

The best of both worlds.

Just... neither of them were the world that had Jason in.

Heck, she didn't need a couch. She knew that this wasn't some teen crush that she could just get over.

And then she saw the tall, blond, utterly gorgeous Dominic wandering over to her, buttoning up his shirt, and forgot all about

Jason Kane.

Benny hurriedly used her wrist communicator to order dinner via Joseph, her electronic porter and general looker-afterer, and walked up to Dominic with a smile on her face.

‘Everything in order?’ she said. ‘Come on, I’ll show you where I live.’

By the time Benny and Dominic entered the Mansionhouse, Joseph was beeping urgently to tell her that dinner was served.

Even so, they took a few moments to admire the architecture.

Take a good look,’ Benny told Dominic, ‘visitors aren’t usually allowed in here. But while Brax is away...’

He smiled. ‘I feel exceptionally honoured!’

‘You are!’ She gazed around. ‘I’ve been here for a while now, and I can’t get used to it. It’s quite the most gorgeous building I’ve ever been in in my life. And wait till you see the dining room!’

Two minutes later, Dominic agreed that the dining room was truly stunning.

‘It’s based on the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles on old Earth,’ Benny explained. ‘Um, if you’d like to sit just there – yes, under the third chandelier – gosh, look at that, I can see you reflected all along the wall. Well, never mind that. Wine?’

‘Thank you.’ Dominic passed across his glass and she filled it, and hers, brimfull of the deep ruby liquid. She took a gulp and shuddered happily. Why on earth was she feeling so tense? She looked at Dominic. Oh yes. Of course.

She began to ladle pasta on to two fine china (but ingeniously ever-warm) plates. ‘It’s veggie, by the way,’ she said. ‘Hope you’re okay with that.’

‘Oh, fine. It smells delicious. And as I said, I’m starving. I could eat a horse.’ He caught her eye, and did that grin again, a bit shame-facedly. ‘I mean a vegetarian horse, of course. That is, a horse made out of vegetables.’

‘Soya protein fake horse meat? Well, it could catch on.’

Benny sighed. ‘Centuries of scientific achievement, and no one’s been able to invent a decent meat-free bacon sandwich yet. One of my biggest disappointments.’

She passed a heaped plate across, and noted with some astonishment that her wine glass was already empty. She refilled it. Dominic’s was still full.

They ate in companionable silence, Benny trying not to stare too much at her guest, and ruing the stupid, stupid decision to order tagliatelle as she was getting pasta sauce all over her chin. Whereas Dominic was expertly twirling the long strands and popping them cleanly into... his... mouth. Ahem. More wine.

It wasn't until the pasta plates were cleared and dishes of a chocolatey moussey thing with cherries were in front of them (and Benny's wine glass had again been filled) that she broached the subject of the Soul-Sucker.

'I've dug out all the geological reports,' she told him, 'and there's really no sign. Not even the tiniest clue. I've even spoken to Adrian Walt the head of construction – none of the builders has uncovered anything that might help us.'

Dominic said, 'Then we should concentrate on the areas where work has yet to take place.'

Benny had explained that she didn't think they should do anything until Brax came back – it was his planet after all, much as she disliked having to hang around doing nothing – and was about to embark on yet another discouraging lecture about the probability of finding anything anyway, when there was a knock at the door. The ferocity of the knocking gave Benny a pretty good idea who the visitor was. 'Coming, Adrian,' she called, adding 'Excuse me,' to Dominic, and downing the last of her wine as she got up.

'Adrian! What a delightful surprise!' Benny said, as her pointedly hard stare said 'Sod off *now*.'

'My bulldozer's just fallen into an underground cave thing,' growled Adrian Wall. 'What're you gonna do about it?'

Benny had told Adrian that he wasn't to touch anything, and she'd sort things out in the morning. He was obviously fairly disappointed that she wasn't going to let him spoil her evening, but, as she said, at least he could knock off early and have the evening off himself, and he grudgingly accepted that as a reasonable substitute.

Having got rid of the grumpy Killoran, she sat back down at the table, where Dominic's eyes were gleaming. 'You heard that, then?' she said, picking up her glass of wine and taking a much-needed swig. She frowned at the glass for a second before putting it back on the table. She was obviously imagining things. Dominic's glass was empty, and she raised her eyebrows to offer a refill.

He shook his head. 'No thanks. Benny – can't we go and check it out now?' His fists were clenched. 'This is it – I know it is!' Benny frowned again. 'A, it's nearly dark. B, I think I should talk to Brax first, and C, it's probably just a coincidence.'

'Then call Brax! Get some torches! And let's for goodness sake find out if it's real or not! Honestly, Bernice, we could be five minutes and half a mile away from the greatest discovery of the century!'

'It's only February,' Benny reminded him, 'and as the only other thing that's been discovered so far this century is a medieval privy on Viola Cappa, that's not such a huge incentive.' She paused. 'Oh, what

the heck. I want to find out as much as you do, I'm just trying to be the grown up for once. I'll go and call Brax.'

'Can I come too?' he said, sounding suddenly a bit sheepish.

'I'd – well, I'd like to see where you live.'

'Um, yes, of course. You'll have to excuse the mess.' Benny, who never apologised for the mess when it was a mess, cunningly didn't mention that she'd spent the whole afternoon doing a massive spring clean, including fresh sheets, on the slight off-chance of Dominic wanting to see where she lived.

And where she slept.

'The person you are calling has not responded. Please try again later.'

Benny slammed her fist on the desk. She'd tried every contact number she could think of, and had got nowhere. Brax was unreachable. A brief thought popped into her mind that he was, unlike her, having a private night where he was managing to avoid being bothered. The idea was faintly disturbing.

One last attempt.

'The person you are calling has not responded. Please try again later.'

What the heck, if she found a legend under the ground, it would be a lovely surprise for Brax on his return.

Benny grabbed her denim jacket, a torch and a trowel, and told Dominic they were going anyway.

The cavern into which Adrian Wall's bulldozer had fallen seemed to be a natural structure, a hollow not far under the planetoid's surface. It wasn't that big – indeed, the upended bulldozer filled it right up – but it had what appeared to be tunnel entrances on all sides, going further in and deeper.

Unfortunately Benny's torch had revealed most of these to be dead ends. All except one. And that one had no end in sight.

Crawling through dark, cold, dirty tunnels was one of those things that defined Benny's life. She rather liked it, in a slightly masochistic sort of way. She appreciated the still and the quiet; the sense that she was approaching something, that anything could be ahead of her; the forthcoming rush of discovery.

Untroubled by claustrophobia, somewhere deep inside she experienced – though she would never admit it to herself – a sense of safety, of being out of reach of the big bad world.

Dominic had wanted to lead, but she hadn't let him. Okay, it was his baby really, but he was just an archivist; she was the practical one. And was she! Before he'd come down here, Dominic had put on a leather jacket with the collar turned up, leather gloves to protect his" hands, and wrapped a silk scarf round his face. It brought back

Benny's slight feeling of discomfort – as a jump-right-in, never-mind-the-mud kind of girl she instinctively mistrusted anyone so caring of their own appearance. Or perhaps her scraped and scarred body was just jealous. Whatever, she preferred to be in front, even if it meant she didn't get to gaze at Dominic's bottom. Thinking of which, she tried to scrunch in her own buttocks to give Dominic a slightly... smaller view. But it didn't work, she couldn't hold the muscles and crawl forwards at the same time. He'd just have to suffer.

This tunnel definitely appeared to be a natural formation... but the door coming up at the end of the tunnel obviously wasn't.

Oh goddess. This could be it. This could really be it! And even if it wasn't 'it', it was something. Something important.

Something unsuspected. She'd just been going through the motions, really, not actually believing there was going to be something to find even after Adrian Wall's revelation, even after finding the tunnels, but... there was. There actually was!

'I really don't understand this,' she called back to Dominic. 'This is right under the surface. How come the geological surveys didn't pick it up?'

'Faulty equipment?' Dominic offered.

'Possible, I suppose.'

'Does it really matter?' He laughed. 'This is it! Can't you feel it? She's down here!'

'If "she" is down here,' Benny said, unreasonably annoyed at his enthusiasm, 'she's hardly going to be a "she" anymore. How many hundreds of years are we talking? Now can you shine your torch over my shoulder so I can see what I'm doing with this door?'

It took Benny more than an hour to open the door. It wasn't locked, or anything like that, but pretty firmly stuck in place.

Dirt had piled up around it and solidified, and resisted Benny's attempts to scrape it away. Also, the door was obviously so old that she didn't want to exert any undue pressure on it, for fear of it falling to bits on her. Dominic, crouched behind her, seemed caught up in a silent ecstasy of anticipation. His eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the door all the while she was working on it. She was half-tempted to suggest they swap places so he could be the one getting his hands dirty – but she didn't really want that. Right now, this was hers.

As she finally eased the door open, stale, warm air sweeping over them, Benny heard Dominic let out an almost sensual sigh. And she realised he had really had no doubts at all about what they were going to find.

It was another natural rock cavern; for some reason the planetoid had formed with these few holes under the surface.

But this one had been taken and used for something more.

Rocky shelves lined the walls, cracked clay pots in rows on them. A table-like structure was piled with clay tablets. But Benny didn't see any of these till later. Her attention was focused on the objects in the room's centre. Somehow, the room had been shielded from those microbes that reduce vegetable matter to mush. The central stone slab was covered with brittle traces of grass and fern – an ancient attempt at comfortable bedding?

Lying on the slab – legs straight, arms crossed, one-time eyes staring unseeingly at the ceiling – was a mummified figure. As Benny shone the torch on – her? – she could just make out a few strands of reddish hair clinging to the leathery scalp.

And the figure was holding a crystal. The size of an orange, irregular facets bouncing the torchlight to every corner of the cave. Benny forgot her archaeological dignity so far as to do a quick dance on the spot.

Then a wave of – nausea? – swept through her, and she decided she'd better stay still. It didn't stop her joy, though.

'She's here,' Dominic was saying. 'She's here.'

'Woo hoo!' carolled Benny, grabbing him in a big hug. She felt him tense away for the briefest of moments, and then her hug was returned.

'Let me look at the crystal,' he said, removing her arms from around him and moving towards the body.

Benny leapt in front of him. 'I'm sorry, Dominic, you mustn't touch anything. Not yet. This is too important to disturb in the heat of the moment.'

'But I found her. This is the Soul-Sucker.'

'This *may* be the Soul-Sucker. You mustn't make assumptions like that. What did they teach you at archivist-school?'

He seemed unable to tear his gaze from the crystal. 'I could take it now. You couldn't stop me.'

Benny took a step back. 'I think you'll find I could. I'm tougher than you, mate.'

He looked at her then, and smiled. 'You're probably right. Anyway, I wouldn't want to risk bruising my knuckles on you.'

A laugh. 'Don't look like that. It was a joke!'

'Do you know how many times I've been beaten up, tricked, betrayed or knocked unconscious?' Benny asked him. 'Don't joke.'

And he hadn't been joking. She'd been beaten up, tricked, betrayed and knocked unconscious enough times to know when someone was serious. Yes, she could handle herself, but actually she probably wasn't tougher than him; she remembered admiring his firmly muscled arms. And suddenly she was aware of quite how much wine

she'd drunk that evening. They'd got through two bottles between them – or had they? Now she came to think of it, she'd not seen a drop pass Dominic's lips. And she had been paying quite a lot of attention to his lips. Maybe two full bottles to herself was why she was suddenly feeling so strange and woolly-headed.

Every muscle tensed up, like a cornered animal. She didn't trust him. She wanted to run – but what if she were wrong, what would the world say about a noted archaeologist who hot-footed it from a major discovery because her co-discoverer gave her a bit of a funny look? (But there again, what would they say about a noted archaeologist who got herself knocked out/locked up/whatever yet again because she was too worried about what the world would say if she ran away?) They'd get out of here. She'd play it cool. She suddenly realised she'd never asked for proof that Dominic – surname? – really was an archivist working for De Vallen. And even if he was, that would be Arsine De Vallen, hideous rival to her own sort-of boss, Irving Braxiatel. She felt really stupid. And the world would say she was a typical pathetic woman, hypnotised by a guy's good looks. The worst thing was, it was more or less true, and she felt a wave of self-disgust that sickened her.

Cool. Keep cool.

'I'm going to look at those tablets,' she said. 'We should find out as much as we can about what's gone on here before we start to excavate in earnest.' (Not that you'll be doing any of the excavating, matey-boy.) She backed over to the stone table, one eye on Dominic all the time. But he was unmoving, staring at the crystal again. 'I'm going to take some of these with us. I'm trained, it's allowed,' she added, deflecting a criticism that never came. 'Now, you lead the way out,'

(because I don't want my back to you) 'and we'll go back to my place.' (Where there are security systems, Joseph the porter hovering about, comm terminals and a variety of potential weapons.)

Benny didn't shut the door behind them – admittedly it would be hard for Dominic to twist round in the tunnel without alerting her, but let's not take any unnecessary chances. First thing in the morning, after sleeping off the wine and making a few judicious enquiries, she'd bring down a de-humidifier and atmosphere control unit to preserve things as they were; they'd already let in the damp air and the millions of microscopic organisms it contained, but she could at least limit the damage.

Dominic didn't say a word, even when they were out of the tunnel. Benny decided that was extra sinister.

She felt better once she was in the fresh air – physically, at least. The cold night breeze cleared her head. Keeping Dominic at a distance, she hastily scribbled and tacked up a dozen signs telling

anyone (meaning Adrian Wall) not to enter the caves under pain of torture.

Then she shivered, and changed it to 'under pain of Ms Jones's wrath'. There were some things she didn't joke about.

They returned to the Mansionhouse, Benny carefully carrying the clay tablets. They were covered with scratched runes, a language she vaguely recognised but did not know. Dominic seemed unaware of her antipathy towards him. He was smiling, eyes shining in a childhood-Christmas sort of way. As he gazed at Benny, she forgot her concerns for a second.

'I'll show you to a spare room,' she said. 'Get some sleep now, 'cos we're going to have a busy day tomorrow.'

Dominic did the kicked-puppy thing. 'I thought we were going back to yours,' he said. 'Shouldn't we at least toast our success?'

'I really need my sleep. Seriously. I'm – ha ha! – not as young as I was.'

He moved closer, raising his leather-clad hand to caress her cheek, and her insides flip-flopped. She cursed her body for its betrayal.

This was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, and he appeared to want her. All her body wanted to do was play along with that, ignoring her mind screaming against it.

With an effort – oh Goddess, what an effort! – she removed his hand, and attempted a smile. 'Dominic. I'm married, you know.' (But did he know that she was also divorced – and, actually, could one technically be unfaithful to a husband who was not only an ex, but in a completely separate dimension?)

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But you do know I find you very attractive, don't you?'

'Ha ha!' laughed Benny, slightly hysterically. 'I really must go to bed now that's your room down there second door on the right see you in the morning good night.'

She almost ran back to her rooms.

Benny slammed the door behind her, and locked it. The she unlocked it again, and opened it. 'Joseph,' she said to her spherical porter, 'I want you to stay in the hallway. If anyone – and by anyone, I really mean that guy who I was having dinner with earlier – should come anywhere near my door before morning, I want to know about it. Send an alarm pulse to my wrist band or something.'

'Very good, Professor,' he agreed.

'And don't let him sneak out to the site, either. Actually, that won't work if you're outside my door. Better stay outside his instead.'

'Certainly, Professor.' Joseph hovered off down the corridor.

Benny shut and locked the door again. She laid out the clay tablets on her desk, ran a portable scanner over them, and set an automatic

translator program to work. It'd take a few hours to come up with anything readable, but she could check through it in the morning.

She attempted to put another call through to Brax. 'The person you are calling has not responded. Please try again later.'

She sent a mail to Ms lories, flagged urgent, requesting that Dominic's security pass should be suspended pending further enquiries.

Then she picked up a bottle and glass off a bookshelf and poured herself a nightcap. Relaxing as the brandy flowed through her system, she just managed to stagger into her bedroom and peel off her clothes before falling fast asleep.

The next thing Benny knew was waking up in the rocky cavern.

Alarums and Excursions

‘Knock out drops in the brandy,’ someone was saying, somewhere. ‘I always like to be prepared. I was a boy scout once. But they threw me out when they realised that their idea of a “good turn” and mine didn’t quite match.’

Someone else was saying ‘Alert! Alert! Alert!’.

Then the first someone was saying, ‘I disabled your porter. Unfortunately he’d already sent you an alarm, and it seems to be attuned to your voice print only. But we’ll turn it off in a minute.’

Benny tried to open her eyes. It didn’t seem to work.

Peculiarly, it wasn’t the nightmare thing of your body refusing to do what you told it, she literally wasn’t aware of having any eyes at all.

A few seconds later, and she could see something, faint and blurry. Even though she still hadn’t opened her eyes.

The images grew more distinct. And suddenly Bernice’s eyes opened. Only trouble was, she was staring down at them.

‘I knew she wanted a body again,’ the voice was saying. ‘She wanted mine, earlier, I could feel her trying to get inside my mind. I couldn’t let her have it. And as I knew you’d soon be unconscious – well, it seemed the logical thing to give her yours instead.’

Benny wanted to say something, but she no longer had a mouth. She screamed silently inside her mind.

‘My lady, I have given you form again. I welcome you from your long rest.’

Benny’s mouth opened. After a minute, a croak came from her throat. ‘I... live. I... feel. I am reborn!’

Benny felt it was rather anticlimactic for Dominic to next tell the reborn Soul-Sucker – because who else could it be? – to switch off Benny’s wrist alarm and put some clothes on.

* * *

Bernice’s body sat up. Benny noted that it was on the central stone slab; the mummified corpse pushed to one side. The crystal was now in Benny’s hands.

‘I have waited so long for a mind to approach me,’ Benny’s voice said. ‘A weak one, that could not resist my lure.’

Dominic looked up in the air. ‘Assuming you’re listening, Benny, you shouldn’t be offended,’ he said. ‘She’s not saying you’re weak-minded – just that you were asleep at the time. No conscious mind to

resist the pull of the crystal. And Avril here is very skilful, of course – she can displace the minds that other Soul-Suckers cannot reach!’ He laughed.

‘Av-ril,’ the Benny-creature said. ‘Yes, I am Av-ril. I had... forgotten. Forgotten what it is to... be real. Solid. Feeling.’

Benny looked down. She’d never had a complex about her body – but she’d also never noticed quite how much sitting forward like that made her stomach bulge over her knickers, and, as Avril stretched, she wished she’d taken the time to shave her armpits at the same time as her legs. Not that she wasn’t all for the natural woman, and all that, but... well, it was more dignified. She’d have to finally splash out and do one of those five minute laser treatment things that she kept never getting around to.

When she got her body back, that was.

She was relieved when the Soul-Sucker began to dress.

Dominic had obviously raided Benny’s wardrobe at the same time he kidnapped her. The centuries-old sorceress didn’t seem overly impressed with the blue jeans and ‘Archaeologists do it with a trowel’ T-shirt, and she looked at the sports bra as if it were not only a torture device but smelly with it, and chucked it on the ground. That irritated Benny a bit – okay, she didn’t have a lot to hold in, but she was at the time of life where sagging began to become an issue and she was not going to let some ancient cow give her stretch marks.

‘You’re in the crystal, you know,’ said Dominic – and Benny found herself whooshed upside down, roller-coaster style, and yes, she was looking out of the crystal now – ‘assuming you’re still around at all. It’s a soul-storer, you see. That’s how Avril worked her body-swapping tricks in the old days. Suck out a person’s essence into the crystal, and fill the void with your own. Then when her body was dying in exile here she – evacuated it? Would that be an appropriate term? I only came for the crystal, of course, but as soon as I felt the pull on my mind, I knew what had happened – and that I couldn’t risk being in contact with it. I had drugged your night-time brandy when we went to your rooms – yes, I researched you thoroughly – in case you refused to explore and I had to come down alone for the crystal. Turns out it was a very good thing that I did. For me anyway. Not for you, of course.’

Benny came up with a dozen scathing retorts. But she couldn’t say any of them.

Suddenly Avril raised the crystal, and Benny lurched with it.

There was no feeling of physical sensation, yet somehow she was still aware of movement. Higher, higher...

Dominic dived forward with a cry as Avril smashed the crystal on the hard rock floor. A million shards flew out in slow motion.

‘No!’ Dominic grabbed Avril’s (Benny’s) arm. ‘What are you doing?!’
‘I am weak,’ the Soul-Sucker said. ‘But I will not give up form again. Without the crystal to contain it, the freed soul will wither and die. The mind cannot regain the body. This body. *My* body.’

Avril stepped down off the stone slab, and strode for the doorway.

It wasn’t yet sunrise. Benny was vaguely aware that her signs for Adrian Wall were still in place, as she followed Dominic and Avril on to the surface. They were going back to the Mansionhouse. Of course, Avril had security clearance now.

Benny tried to concentrate on Avril, on what the woman was saying. But there was the beauty of a buttercup, the veins in its petals so beautiful and hypnotic, she didn’t need light to see it – no! *Avril*. What Avril was saying. ‘I will return. My cavern awaits me. The people of Hera will know of me again...’

And Dominic: ‘Take me to the cavern. I must have a crystal.’

And Avril again, a slight sneer in her voice (a sneer that Benny’s voice never usually had): ‘Oh yes. You may come with me to the cavern. You must take me back to Hera.’

And Benny realised that they weren’t going to the Mansionhouse, they were going to the shuttle port. And the first shuttle left long before Ms Jones would have checked her messages, so they wouldn’t be stopped. And anyway, if they were questioned, they’d think Avril was Benny anyway, and she could laugh it all off. And anyway! Yes! She didn’t want them to be stopped. Whither and die, Avril had said. Without a crystal. But they were going to where there were many, many crystals. If Benny could just hold on that long... if she soared high enough maybe she could reach the stars in the sky, shining... shining...

The Golden Girl

Benny was waking up from a long dream. A nice dream. The waking was sweet and gentle, the sort she remembered from summer nights under the stars, where the morning sun would slowly warm your eyelids and bring you to consciousness. She bathed in this hazy state for a while, before becoming fully aware.

And remembering.

She wondered what had awoken her. Hadn't she been supposed to fade away without the crystal, or something? Not that she was complaining, obviously.

Then she remembered a bit more. She'd been following Dominic and Avril on to the shuttle, hoping to be led to more crystals. She focused her... well, she'd still call it sight, for want of a better word. There were Dominic and Avril. And so Benny must be closer to other crystals, enough for her to have being again, to regain her mind. Yes, yes, she recognised this place – the seating, the displays, the atmosphere: this was the shuttle port on Hera, where she'd met Dominic that first time. Hey –

Dominic had taken Avril to the same bar; they were even sitting at the same table. Obviously his Heran hot-spot. That made Benny feel a lot less special. Of course, the bit where he'd tied her up and nicked her body had been a bit of a clue, too. Now, what were they saying...?

Dominic was leaning over the table, smiling dreamily at the woman who looked like Benny.

'You're wondering why I want a crystal so much? Well, fair enough question – I'm obviously not looking to swap my body for another.' He unconsciously ran his fingers down his chest.

'Yes, I'm very happy with the way I am, thank you. It's money, obviously. I wish to maintain a very high standard of living, and for that I need a good deal of money. I have done a lot of things towards that end, most of them illegal, but this, I hope, will be the last. The last for profit, anyway –' he laughed – 'who knows what I might do for fun? It's De Vallen who's hired me for this, he's the one who wants the crystal. Who's he? Only the richest man in this sector. And you would not believe what he's going to pay me for this. Which is why I *have* to succeed. Do you know what it costs to keep me looking like this? And every job I do increases the risk of injury, disfigurement... it's intolerable that I should live like this!

'You're very different to the archaeologist. You look the same –

obviously – but you don't act it. She was giving me sheep's eyes the whole time – not that that's unusual. Oh, I know you're not. Hey, I don't care how many thousand years old you are, you look okay on the outside – not that you've got the greatest body in the world there, but it'll do. It's not like you had any choice in the matter. You do realise that you have me to thank for your resurrection? Just don't forget it, that's all.

'Now, where is this cavern? Yes, of course I understand that the planet's changed a bit. Yes, it is the same planet. Look, just stay there, I'll be back in a minute. Take this. No, you eat it. It's called chocolate. It's new since your day, okay?'

Dominic crossed the port lounge and went into the men's room. It crossed Benny's mind that this was the first time she'd been in a cubicle with a guy, which considering the way her life had been sometimes was almost surprising. Thankfully, as she was having a difficult enough job keeping it together as it was, it was soon obvious that he was only there to make a private call.

Benny tried to hear what was being said – somehow it seemed the most important thing in the world to her at the moment. She was probably just latching on to it to keep herself focused. Annoyingly, she couldn't make out the words of whoever was on the other end of the comms unit. She was sure there must be a way – heck, if she'd been this close in body she could have eavesdropped with the best of them – but she couldn't work it out. She had a vague impression that the other voice was high-pitched, a woman, but that was it. Being an efficient disembodied spirit was going to take some practice. If she didn't fade away first.

'Hello darling, it's me. No, there's been a change of plan.' A pause, the other person speaking. 'Of course it's not a problem. You know me.' A pause, and a slight laugh. 'Mm, no one knows me better, babe. Look, I'm at the port. I want you here.' Pause. 'No, not like that. Well, obviously like that, but not while I'm working. You don't know me though. Just keep close. Yeah, bye. Bye.'

Dominic shut off the comms unit, and his hand drifted to his waist. Benny was alarmed to see the bulge of a concealed blaster. She must have missed him picking that up, but it did rather confirm that he was not on the side of the good guys.

Dominic, and Benny, returned to Avril. She seemed to be enjoying discovering chocolate. Benny felt a momentary twinge of irritation – all the weight-gain with none of the pleasure. Now that really wasn't fair.

Dominic led Avril – still eating and, Benny was embarrassed to see, making crooning noises of pleasure with every bite – over to an

electronic map of the area. It was marked up with Hera's tourist attractions – a holographic image of each appearing if you pressed the relevant icon. Avril seemed completely unfazed by it – perhaps the technology of her day had been even greater. Dominic was pointing out landmarks – lakes, hills, forests. Avril was shrugging and vaguely indicating an area on the right hand side of the map, and then she gestured towards a nearby flyer rank. Dominic shook his head, and they walked back to their seats. Delaying until Dominic's girlfriend/partner/whatever got here, Benny thought. Then she got distracted by the iridescence of an oily sheen on a puddle near the flyer rank and didn't think anything else for quite a while.

There are seven colours in the rainbow, and a million variations in between. Benny could see every single one of them. She had known, theoretically, that the spectrum went much further than that, all the way from infrared to ultraviolet. Now she could see those too. Suddenly everyone looked like an angel, and for some reason she thought of her ex-husband, Jason.

One of the angels had been standing still for an eternity: a small angel whose lustrous skin shined with golden light. The angel suddenly moved, and Benny wanted to scream at the disruption of her perfect vision.

Other angels swam into focus, a tall, dark-haired figure and an even taller one with shimmering mother-of-pearl skin and hair. They were moving, and the beautiful gold angel was treading in their footsteps. Benny cried, but it didn't work, somehow. Because... because she didn't have a body anymore.

Because of a man... and a sorceress... those two angels, who weren't angels. And Benny had to follow them, because... because...?

She didn't want to follow anyone, she didn't want to move.

She was at one with the air, and the light, and colours and sounds, and it was the happiest she'd ever been. She'd never felt so warm and happy, not even on her wedding day. Her wedding day? She was having trouble holding on to thoughts.

She was Professor Bernice Summerfield, archaeologist-in-residence at the Braxiatel Collection, one time wife of Jason Kane (known scumbag) and she had to get her body back.

He had been a sexy scumbag, though. Good! She was focusing again.

But she needed to concentrate on the now. Dominic and Avril. Where were they? Oh Goddess, they'd gone!

But there was the shining angel – no, think, Bernice – the gold-skinned girl who had seemed to be following them. She was getting into a flyer. Benny had to assume that this was Dominic's partner, that

she really was following them, that she would lead Benny to Dominic and Benny's body and the Crystal Cavern where Benny might be able to stabilise. Because at the moment her grasp on reality was coming and going at an alarming rate and if she didn't find an anchor soon she really might wither and die. And that didn't sound like a hugely fun thing.

Benny floated over to the girl. Floated wasn't really the right word, but past experience hadn't equipped her with the vocabulary needed to describe this disembodied sensation. She didn't even know the words to express how strange it was.

Perhaps there weren't words that strong.

She didn't have eyes anymore. But she could still see. She could focus on one thing, like the girl, but she was aware of everything else around her too: the lounge 'behind' her, the ground below, the sky above. Sort of like having eyes in the back of your head. And the sides and the top, and under your chin too.

It was taking all her effort to stay focused on the girl. The girl was pressing a keycard into a slot in the car's dead control panel. As it clicked in, the panel jumped to life with a hum that set Bernice's metaphorical teeth on edge. Sound. She was more sensitive to certain sounds now. Did it help to know that?

No, probably not.

There was a beep, and the card slid out. An electronic voice came from somewhere nearby. 'Credit sufficient. Welcome to FerroCars, No Name Given.' More buttons on the control panel lit up.

Benny – didn't whistle. Goddess, she really needed a *lexicon discamate*, and she needed it fast. She... expressed extreme disembodied surprise. To get a keycard that kept you anonymous – not just a false name that could still be tracked to you, but an actual name-free card – well, that was pretty damn rare. You needed either unbelievably good hacker skills, or superb contacts in the criminal fraternity and a large amount of cash.

No Name Given had flicked some switches and the car was surging forward. Benny tried, as much as was possible, to settle back for the ride. She studied the unnamed girl. She looked a few years younger than Benny, so assuming she was standard human, that made her about twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Her skin was smooth and metallic, so purely golden that it gleamed in the sunlight. Her hair was so long she was sitting on it, absolutely straight, and identical in colour to her skin. Benny was pretty sure her race wasn't native to Hera – she looked like she came from the Calamanus System. The girl was also slim and tiny, and the tight red top and white shorts she was wearing showed she had all the commonly-desired curves.

Benny was jealous as hell. Mind you, right now she was pretty

damn jealous of anyone who had a body, whatever it looked like.

Benny had been to Hera once or twice, for a meal, or shopping, nothing important. She didn't know the place, its geography or anything like that, and she hadn't the faintest idea where they were now. Hera seemed to be a very woody sort of place. Lots of trees and bushes. The road they were on now was only a dirt track. If this girl was following Dominic – and she'd better be – then she was keeping her distance, because any other vehicle would stand out for miles.

Benny tried to be worried about that. Worried that she was off on a wild goose chase with some unconnected criminal who just happened to be there at the right time. Worried that she might never find Dominic or Avril or the crystal cavern.

Worried that she might never get her body back; never see Wolsey or Brax or Adrian Wall ever again; never get the chance to find Jason.

But, somehow, she couldn't. None of it really seemed to matter. She wasn't even sure why she'd bothered in the first place.

She didn't feel a thing. She didn't feel the need to be in the car any more, to stay with this girl any more. She would just stay where she was, until she wasn't anywhere.

Dimly she was aware of the girl's flyer speeding off deeper into the trees. But very soon Benny didn't even understand what being aware meant.

It was like being awoken by a thousand alarm clocks, with a thousand torches being shone in your eyes. Never had Benny gone from one state to another so swiftly – it was nothing like her previous reawakenings.

She was Bernice again, and she mentally shuddered at how close she'd come to not being Bernice any more. But... how?

She had faded away, she knew it, she could *feel* it rather than actually remembering it. Her... soul, if you'd call it that, the part of her that made her Bernice, had come closer than she'd believed possible to crossing the line between life and death, and she didn't understand how it had found its way back.

The explosion of awareness was fading, and she was beginning to see again, to notice physical surroundings. Which meant she suddenly understood.

This wasn't like the fake rainbow colours that had captured her attention before. This was iridescence given form. There could never be a word to describe its beauty. She'd never truly understood before how white light could be made out of every colour in the spectrum, but now she could see every colour in every atom.

If she'd had any breath, this would have taken it away. She was, undoubtedly, in the Crystal Cavern. *Inside* the crystals of the Crystal

Cavern.

Trying desperately to hold on to her Benniness in the midst of such a sensation-overload, Benny figured it out. If Avril had sucked out Benny's sleeping mind with a single crystal, how much greater must the pull of a cavern full of them be? And how much weaker must she have been disembodied and near death than merely asleep?

She flowed forward, peering out of the wall of crystals. There was nothing to see but the far side, sparkling into infinity. No Dominic, no Avril, no unknown golden-skinned girl. Was Benny too late, or had she travelled at the speed of thought to get here first? She pulled back, waiting.

And felt something. How that could possibly be she couldn't say, but she did feel something: the touch of another mind, a sleeping mind. She recoiled. And felt another sleeping mind.

Back, and into another. She was surrounded. Hundreds upon hundreds of sleeping minds, all around her. Minds with no bodies, trapped forever in the crystals. Avril's former victims?

Those she had displaced from their bodies, forced to wander until the pull of the cave became too great – and then they could do nothing but wait until their consciousness slipped away.

Horried, Benny flung herself blindly through the crystals.

She hit another sleeping mind, hard. And it awoke.

A voiceless scream filled the crystals. And as it flowed out, it slammed into mind after mind after mind, waking them all.

Benny was trapped in a circle of terror, and what was worse was that nothing else here knew what it was. There were what had once been hundreds of people in here with her, and now they knew nothing but fear.

Benny tried to get out, leave these minds, leave the crystals.

She couldn't. The pull of the crystals was too great, and the screaming – it was everywhere. She dashed this way, that way, every way – nothing. She was trapped with the screaming minds, and soon she would become one of them.

5 Let's Be Other People

There was a whispering in the crystals, and Benny awoke. She wasn't sure, but she thought she might have been asleep for a hundred years. Which would make her a princess, wouldn't it?

There had been a lot of screaming, and then everyone in the castle had fallen asleep. She could definitely remember there being a wicked witch involved. Which meant... had she been awoken by a handsome prince?

Yes! There he was! Standing in front of her, so proud and tall.

Proud, tall, and a murdering git called Dominic, her memories prompted her. Which meant that Benny herself probably wasn't actually a princess either. Bum. No fantastic frocks and glittering tiaras.

And, of course, no body or head to put them on anyway.

Goddess – even on her worst mornings-after, she'd never had to cope with quite such devastating memories flooding back.

And on top of it all, the realisation that if Dominic was here it hopefully meant Avril was too, and this could be Benny's one last chance to get her body back.

Benny concentrated on the world outside the crystals. It was difficult. Everything was so much more beautiful, so much more real, inside the shimmering wall.

But out there... It was like catching a glimpse into a far off funfair mirror. There she was, Benny herself, standing in a frankly ridiculous hands-on-hips pose, and she seemed to be laughing. It wasn't, however, anything like Benny's laugh. If the situation wasn't quite so serious, Benny would be really embarrassed about how melodramatic it sounded.

Dominic stared as Benny's – as *Avril's* face began to... sparkle.

Not from the rainbow light of the crystals, this was something more, something from inside her.

Avril was laughing at him. 'You have brought me to the birthplace of my power,' she said. 'I am restored. The crystals know me. And – she said – 'they want you.'

Dominic was swaying on his feet, trying to reach for the blaster at his waist, but couldn't move.

'You want to go to them,' Avril said. 'I know. I felt them too, once. They call you, and you have to go.'

'No,' hissed Dominic. 'Not... go. Have to... take crystal...'

Avril laughed again at that. 'You think I would let you take a crystal?' she said, amused, plucking one from the wall and holding it

up in front of him. 'You think I would lead you to the very centre of my power and then just... give it all up to someone else? How very, very wrong you are.'

Dominic could hear the crystals in his mind. They wanted him so badly, and he desired them more than anything else in the world.

In the background of his mind, swirling amidst the call of the crystals, a tiny voice seemed to be telling him he was an utter git. But he ignored that.

Avril was by his side. She seemed to be taking his gun. That didn't really matter. And then he was in the crystals.

Benny felt like her mind was being used in a tug of war competition. Pulled this way, pulled that. The crystals wanted her, and she wanted to stay in the crystals. But... no no no no no! She *didn't* want to stay. She wanted a body again. And... she could feel a void. There was a body out there, and it had a vacancy.

She was going to take it.

Dominic's body crumpled.

Avril raised the gun. She studied it for a moment, checking exactly where to put her trigger finger. Then she pointed it at the prostrate form.

With the greatest effort of her life, Benny surged out of the crystals and into the waiting void.

Avril began to pull the trigger.

A small gold-skinned girl ran in, screaming, gun aimed straight at Avril.

Benny sat up and yelled 'No!'

Avril was turning to the new arrival, and the new arrival was turning to Benny, just as the guns went off. Which meant neither woman hit their target.

Two bullets smashed into the crystal walls, and the sound was the sound of a million glass goblets shattering on a floor.

Benny instinctively brought up her arms to protect her face, and didn't see the rock crashing down until it was too late. A voice cried 'Your legs!'

'It's okay,' Benny gasped, 'just trapped, not hurt.' But, of course, it wasn't her voice that said the words.

'Don't worry, Dommy, I'll shift it.' Dommy? Oh, pur-lease.

The girl from the flyer was kneeling by Benny's side, straining at the lump of rock pressing Benny's legs to the floor. Only they weren't Benny's legs.

The girl seemed more concerned than was justified by the imminent collapse of the entire cavern with them inside it.

'Your face,' she gasped. 'Is it all right?'

What? 'Er, yeah,' said Benny.

'You said there'd be no danger, no physical stuff.'

'Well, I guess I was wrong,' Benny mumbled, looking around for Avril. 'Where's she gone?'

'Bernice Summerfield? I missed. She ran off. Don't worry about her any more.'

Don't worry about Bernice Summerfield any more. Oh Goddess.

The girl was looking at Benny strangely (and who could blame her?). Benny was having to think very quickly. This girl was trying to rescue her because she thought Benny was actually lover/partner/whatever Dominic. If Benny wanted to get out of here and have any chance of getting her own body back, she'd have to play along with that. Don't think about Dominic's mind, presumably trapped in the crystal wall.

Couldn't afford to worry about things like that. Just have to concentrate on getting her own body back. And stopping whatever dark deeds the Crystal Sorceress might decide to try now she'd been set free after however many thousands of years.

So, be Dominic. Think male and gittish. Shouldn't be too hard. 'Come on, woman, get a move on with that rock!' she said.

The girl gave her that odd look again. Perhaps Benny's characterisation wasn't quite perfect as yet. Better build in an excuse. 'Ooooh,' Benny said, putting a hand to her brow, 'I think I hit my head on the floor. Don't feel quite myself.'

'But your face is all right?' said the girl, anxiously.

'Er, yeah. My face is fine. But my legs...'

There was an ominous rumbling sound from above them, the sort of noise a roof might make if it were about to fall in.

The girl glanced up anxiously, and began to heave even harder at the rocky slab. Benny had had muscles like that once. Where had they gone? To the same place her flat stomach and lack of laughter lines had gone. Funny, she could criticise her body all she liked, but right now she'd still trade just about anything in the world to have it back, flabby bits, beer belly, creases and all. Suddenly the pressure on her legs eased a tiny bit. 'That's it!' she cried encouragingly. 'Just a bit more and I'll be able to slide them out!'

'Be careful, babes,' said the girl, through clenched teeth.

'Yeah, well I'd rather a few cuts and bruises than be crushed to death,' said Benny. And, as before, got the distinct impression that she'd said entirely the wrong thing.

The rock was lifted another couple of millimetres. Very, very slowly, Benny began to ease her legs out. If the girl let the slab fall at the wrong moment...

After the longest thirty seconds in the history of time, Benny was finally free. Just in time. Crystal dust was spinning down from the ceiling, a sure sign that a collapse wasn't far behind if Benny's many previous experiences of rockfalls were anything to go by. The girl put out a hand and helped Benny to her feet, and then they raced for the exit together. Benny discreetly scooped up a lump of crystal as they went. If she wanted to get her body back, she'd need it.

Several rock tunnels stretched in front of them. Benny quickly started up one, but the girl called her back. 'The other one, babes!'

'Sorry!' Benny called back, crawling hurriedly in reverse, not having the faintest idea what led where. The girl was already moving up the other tunnel by the time Benny shuffled backwards into the Crystal Cavern. She threw herself after the girl, and began to crawl upwards. Behind them, with perfect dramatic timing, the cavern collapsed.

It took a long time to reach the surface. Benny was glad that Dominic had seen fit to wear gloves, otherwise her hands would be torn to shreds. And even though they weren't really her hands, she had no doubt that she'd feel the pain.

The going wasn't straightforward either. At least she was now following behind, so she didn't have to worry about going the wrong way, but it seemed that the miles of tunnels had been set with hideous traps for the unwary. Benny kept being surprised by things that she had to circumnavigate, and she tried to explain to the girl that Avril had dealt with all that stuff so she hadn't experienced it before. It wasn't very plausible.

She needed to know more.

Basically, she wanted to get a lot of information out of the girl, without giving anything away herself. It wasn't at all easy, and it led to a lot of awkward silences. One of the things Benny most wanted to find out was this girl's name. She couldn't keep mentally referring to her as 'the girl'. Also, she decided it might seem just a bit suspicious if Dominic didn't know 'the girl's' name, should the subject arise. She'd read a handy hint once that if you'd forgotten someone's name, you should ask them how to spell it. This, apparently, got round the problem with the minimum of embarrassment. Yeah, right. 'Hey babes, I'm sure we've known each other for ages, but while we were crawling up this tunnel I suddenly got worried that I didn't know how to spell your name. How many letters does it have again?' Call her an old sceptic, but that didn't sound overly convincing. What would be more plausible? How about, 'will you marry me, by the way, what name would you then like to be known by?' Not bad, with the added advantage that she might get to find out Dominic's surname, which would probably come in handy at some point. And hey, she could

always break off the engagement later... but possibly that was a bit drastic for a first attempt.

Of course, having already laid the groundwork of a bump on the head, she could try the old amnesia routine... hmm, might be a bit suspicious; if she was going to try that she should have done it straight away. A possible last resort, though. But heck, she had to try something...

‘Hey, babes,’ she called out.

The girl didn’t stop crawling forward, but turned her head back slightly. ‘Uh-huh?’

‘While I was on the Braxiatel Collection, you’ll never guess what, I met someone and they said something, and for a moment I thought they were talking about you, but it turned out they were actually talking about someone called, um, Dorothy, and I’d misheard. It had hilarious consequences.’

‘O... kay...’ said the girl, seemingly unimpressed.

‘Ha ha,’ continued Benny, desperately, ‘imagine me mistaking that name for yours! It doesn’t sound anything like. Does it?’

The girl appeared to think about this. ‘Dorothy... well, I suppose if you said it quickly... but no, not really. You weren’t drunk, were you?’

‘No,’ said Benny, miffed at her lack of success. ‘Unfortunately I’m not. I mean, I wasn’t.’

Nothing else worked either, and Benny finally gave up – for the time being. She had enough other stuff to worry about.

She was extremely glad that the girl – not-Dorothy – was leading the way, because they’d taken so many twists and turns that without guidance Benny might have been stuck down there for years. No wonder the cavern had lain undiscovered for however many centuries.

Back on the surface, she was equally lost. They w?re seriously in the middle of nowhere. Nothing had stirred here for years; the flyer tracks were the only sign of life. Two sets of tracks one way, one set the other. Avril had obviously got the hang of the technology with no problems. At least they still had not-Dorothy’s flyer.

The girl had vaulted into the car – Benny envied her her physical fitness, and then realised that she herself wasn’t huffing or puffing at all. Obviously Dominic worked out too.

Well, that was an advantage.

She jogged over to the car – oh Goddess. Now, that *wasn’t* an advantage. Running in this body was... different, to say the least. Bouncier, in places, for a start. Benny had never had a problem with bounciness in her previous body, which had admittedly been the cause of some resentment occasionally, but all in all she was pretty grateful for it.

She climbed into the car extremely carefully.

Not-Dorothy slammed her keycard in and the car sprang to life. 'To De Vallen's?' she said.

'No!' yelled Benny. 'I mean, no, I think we should follow Avril. Follow the other flyer. Can you do that?'

'Course I can, hon, but it's not gonna get us our money.'

'We don't have a crystal, er, *hon*, so we're not going to get the money anyway. Avril's got one, and we need that before we get paid. So we follow her.'

The girl raised a golden eyebrow. 'You didn't pick up a crystal? Our entire reason for being here? Enough money to keep us in luxury for the rest of our lives on offer, and you didn't pick one up?'

'Well, neither did you!' said Benny defensively, resisting the temptation to flash the crystal that was safely nestling in her jacket pocket.

'Okay, okay!' With a shrug, the girl threw the flyer forward, following the tracks.

Benny was surprised at how long the journey was taking. The girl assured her that they were still following Avril, and she was retracing their earlier steps. Going to the spaceport, the girl guessed, and that was a long way away. Benny had obviously been caught up in the crystals for almost a day – and when she actually came to think about it a bit more, she supposed that was obvious; any mystic cavern that had avoided discovery for a few centuries had to be well off the beaten track.

She avoided awkward chat by telling the girl she'd got a headache from the bump on the head, and needed to rest. She lay back in the passenger seat with her eyes closed, but her mind was working at panic speed.

Her plan was simple. At the port, she would find Avril. Decoy her away somehow (details to be worked out later. Well, in the split second beforehand, probably). As Benny didn't have the faintest chance of besting the Crystal Sorceress herself in any sort of mental duel, she'd have to knock her out – weaken her resistance, like Dominic had done with Benny and the drugged brandy. Then she'd wave the crystal around and do the magicky thing – whatever it might be – and hey presto! Mind and body reunited once more. What would happen to Dominic – in mind or body – she didn't know, and to be quite frank, she didn't care. Honestly, she was sick of good-looking men thinking that she was a gullible middle-aged woman who'd fall for anyone with a reasonable line in charm. When did it happen to her? When did she change from the heroine who got tied up and desired and leered at by the villains, to the sad old biddy who was laughed at behind her back – but – oh! – who had a nice personality?

She opened her eyes a fraction and stole a peak at the reflection in the windscreen. Here she was, young and gorgeous again. Also male, but then you couldn't have everything.

Presumably sensing Benny's slight movement, the girl beside her turned her head. The look of utter lust in her eyes made Benny jump. Goddess, she'd never been looked like that even when she *had* been the alluring heroine.

You know, it wasn't as if she'd been some kind of good-time girl. She'd never just jumped into bed with anyone, even ex-hubby Jason. So it wasn't as if she was missing being bedded by a new swain every other day. But... but... it was nice when they wanted to, even if she didn't have the slightest intention of letting them.

Figure of lust/figure of fun. How to go from one to the other in one easy step, by Professor Bernice Summerfield (age: past it). But... past it, flabby-ish, just the faintest beginning traces of a wrinkle or two – although still with the occasional zit, and how unfair was that? – she still wanted her own body back.

And when she got it, boy was she going to wow everyone in her path. No one would be talking about her nice personality after that. It was going to be matching silk underwear, make-up every morning, not just once a month when she could be bothered, fifty sit ups a day – well, maybe twenty to start with – or ten, and an air of utmost confidence. She was going to be looked at in the way that this girl was looking at Dominic, or die trying.

The makeover started now.

Um, except it couldn't It would start... then. When she got her body back.

Which was going to be soon, because they were just arriving at the port.

Benny was opening the door before the flyer had stopped.

They hadn't seen Avril on the way, which meant she really had had a good head start, so Benny couldn't afford to waste a second. The girl was yelling something after her, but she wasn't paying any attention. She was running through the concourse, trying to look in every direction at once. Then she was walking quite quickly, because running was still a bit of an issue in this body. She could feel the eyes of every woman in the place on her. Bloody hell.

A porter was leaning by a coffee booth, eying the passers-by.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd have noticed a lone woman wandering about, even one as saggy as Benny. 'Excuse me,' she called, walking over to him. 'I'm looking for a woman...'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Don't guess you've got to look far.'

'Ha ha,' said Benny politely. 'A specific woman, I mean, and I was

wondering if you could help me. She's five-nine, short dark hair, brown eyes, blue jeans, red T-shirt... rather attractive, actually.'

'Nah,' said the man, uninterested.

Benny gave him her best pleading look, and put an imploring hand on his arm. He snatched it away as if she'd burnt him. Ah, yes, of course. Different strokes for different folks, as it were. She had to remember what body she was in.

She apologised gruffly, and moved off. She needed a better plan. Why would Avril come back to the spaceport? Why not stay here on Hera, her own planet? Answer: because it hadn't been her home for a long time. She'd been living on – well, in – the Braxiatel Collection, since long, long before it became the Braxiatel Collection. And, actually, thinking of that, there must have been either some serious incompetence or some serious skulduggery going on somewhere along the line for Brax not to have discovered her before this. And as incompetence was the last thing he'd stand for, skulduggery it must have been.

Dominic? Possibly. But that was a problem for another day.

Back to now, and Benny's conclusion: Avril was going back home. She was going to the Braxiatel Collection.

Benny dashed through the concourse towards the Brax shuttle. Yes! There, through the gates, a flash of red. Avril.

A port official stepped out in front of her. 'Security pass, please, sir.' Buzzer!

But wait, Dominic had had a pass. Benny began working her way through Dominic's pockets. Mirror (which she carefully avoided looking in), lip salve, another mirror, comb, shades, sunblock – nothing with his name on it, she noted in passing, which was suspicious enough in itself... In front of her, she could see Avril about to start up the ramp to the shuttle.

Her fingers finally closed on a small round shape. Here it was.

With a sigh of relief she thrust the pass at the official and began to push past him.

He put out an arm to stop her. 'I'm sorry, sir, this pass is no longer valid.'

'What? No, you don't understand...'

'I'm sorry, sir. This is a restricted flight, and your pass was good for one visit only.'

'But... but...' Benny waved a frantic hand in the direction of Avril, now halfway up the ramp. 'Look, that woman isn't who she says she is. She's a dangerous criminal and a major security risk.'

The man chuckled. 'Sorry, sir, I think you're mistaken. That woman happens to be Professor Bernice Summerfield. She's an extremely well-known and highly-respected archaeologist. Author of the seminal

work *Down Among the Dead Men*, you know.'

Oh brilliant The first fan she'd met in years, and he was worshipping an ancient evil sorceress in her stead. And much as she hated doing this to a fan, she could see Avril was just boarding the lemon-coloured shuttle...

She shoved the guy to one side, vaulted over the security gate, and began to run as fast as she could – which was actually quite a lot faster than normal – towards the entry ramp. She was halfway there when the alarms blared out. She was three-quarters of the way there when the guards grabbed her.

The shuttle doors closed.

Benny lost it. Her body had just disappeared, and she was screaming and yelling and hitting out and goodness knows what the security guards were thinking as she ran on about bodies and crystals and mind-swaps. They had her arms twisted behind her, and she was vaguely aware of their shouts about trespass, and assault, and resisting arrest.

'You are in big trouble,' one of the men was saying, and she was trying to kick backwards at him, and then she saw a knee coming towards her and then... oh Goddess! She was going to throw up – she'd never felt anything like this before. Ever. And then she was face down on the ground with what felt like about six security guys sitting on top of her, the fight had completely left her, and she just lay there, gasping, trying to deal with the pain.

'Let him go.' The voice drifted in from above, male and harsh. There were a few sounds of protest, and then suddenly she was free. But she didn't make a move, until strong arms grabbed her and dragged her to her feet.

Standing in front of her were two men dressed in royal blue uniforms, one as pale-skinned as Benny (or, indeed, Dominic), the other a dark colour that might be natural, or might be a particularly intense tan. They both had swords at their waists.

The interested academic part of her brain noted that such unsophisticated weaponry was not uncommon on planets that had had a hurried technological development, partly forced by outside influences. However the swords *were* probably just for show as both men also had somewhat powerful-looking blasters hanging at their hips.

And then the non-academic, extremely personal part of her brain noted that the space shuttle containing Avril was still in its bay. The whole struggle had lasted only seconds. She instinctively strained towards it, but the security guards held tight to her arms. 'Watch it!' one of them growled.

One of the uniformed men smiled at him. 'No threats, please. Mr

Troy here comes under De Vallen jurisdiction.'

And what in the name of anything was *that* supposed to mean? Benny wondered. Still, at least she knew Dominic's surname now. And perhaps Dominic hadn't been entirely lying when he said he worked for Arsine De Vallen...

The same man smiled at Benny. 'I do so hope you weren't attempting to leave the planet, Mr Troy. Mr De Vallen is eagerly awaiting your return, and the provision of the... article, that you were obtaining for him.'

A sudden glimmer of hope for Benny. 'She stole it from me!' she cried. 'Bernice Summerfield stole it from me. She's leaving on that shuttle – you have to let me go after her and get it back!'

'Ooh, you dirty liar!' said Benny's port official fan, who'd wandered over to see the show.

The uniformed man kept smiling, but made no move to secure Benny's release.

'Don't you understand?' she yelled. 'The shuttle's going to be leaving any moment! De Vallen isn't going to be very pleased with you if you've stopped me getting his "article" back.'

'Very true,' the man said. 'But just to make sure you've not been mistaken...'

He gestured to his fellow uniform, who moved forward – and to Benny's horror, began to search her. Still held tight by the security guards, there was nothing she could do about it.

And the man found the crystal.

The other man smiled again. 'Oh, I am pleased,' he said. 'You had been mistaken after all. How lucky we did not rush to stop the shuttle taking off – Mr De Vallen does so abhor unnecessary fuss.'

And as Benny stood there, surrounded by security men and with the crystal – her only means of regaining her own body – taken away from her and shut in a lead-lined box, the shuttle carrying Avril Fenman to the Braxiatel Collection finally lifted off.

Does my Bum Look Big (in this Body)?

It looked like Benny had better get used to a male body for the time being.

It wasn't the first time she'd found herself in a body other than her own – no 'oo ers' if you please – but the last time it'd happened was an extremely long story, and she wasn't going into it now. Anyway, that time she hadn't been human. And she had still been female. (She'd been a small white cat, for anyone interested, and it was all to do with drugs. Look, don't worry about it.)

But this time, she was very definitely a human man.

Let's look at the pros and cons. Pro. She was now utterly gorgeous, and could have any woman she wanted, and probably quite a lot of men too. Con: if they wanted Dominic, she, as Benny, probably didn't want them. Which meant that all those related male advantages, like not having to take a little yellow pill every day, really just balanced themselves out.

Pro. An enormous saving on loo paper. Con... no, couldn't think of any way that wasn't a good thing.

Pro. Able to pee standing up. Of vast, vast use to an adventuress, who could be caught short on any number of hostile worlds with no public lavatory facilities. Con: the means to do this. Honestly, have you seen it? If man truly is made in God's image, then obviously God just wanted to make sure everyone else suffered too. What a totally ridiculous thing!

Either it's flopping about uncomfortably all over the place, or... it isn't. Which is worse. And can you control it? Can you buffalo. It's bad enough when your stomach starts rumbling in the middle of a lecture and you can't help it, but to have something that... noticeable not under your control... Sheesh!

There just were not words to describe how wrong it felt to Benny to have outside things instead of inside things. And to be perfectly honest she was glad there weren't words, because she really didn't want to think about this any more. Anyway.

The vast majority of advantages were lavatory-related, which, while possibly being a convenience, was not really a huge issue in her life. Oh, there must be more to it than that...

Pro. No baddies are going to say things like 'ha, you're only a woman,' or 'show us what you've got, love'. Con. That was never a big

problem anyway, because (a) they're unenlightened shmucks whose opinion counts for naught, (b) she really didn't have a lot to show them in any case, and (c) she could always knee them in the groin. Con x2: she could now be kneed in the groin. And, as she'd discovered, it really was as hideous as men said. She'd doubted it, thought they were being big babies, because women got hurt too, didn't they? But she'd never make fun again.

She wanted her proper body back, big time.

Eventually, the uniformed men – Chevy and Rix, as they referred to each other – were joined by two other men in identical garb, leading Dominic's probable girlfriend between them. She didn't seem happy about it.

'Ah, good,' said Benny's original smiling guard – Chevy. 'Mr De Vallen will want to congratulate you both, personally. So perhaps you would care to accompany us...?'

Benny didn't see that they had much choice. Not only did these guard-guys have weapons – they also had the crystal.

And there was no question at all about that – she had to get it back.

Rix led them both to what seemed to be the flyer equivalent of a limousine. A chauffeur, also dressed in royal blue, was waiting in the driver's seat, separated from the passenger area at the back by a dark-glass partition. Chevy and co did not follow them into the car, which Benny was quite relieved about – it might give her a bit of time to think. She wasn't too worried about letting the crystal out of her sight – it was obviously going to De Vallen, and by all accounts that was where she was being taken too. She only hoped it'd be obvious who De Vallen was when she got there – not recognising her employer could seriously blow her cover.

As could not remembering her 'girlfriend's' name. If only *she* wasn't in the limo too... Almost as soon as the car doors had been slammed on them, it had started. Ex-hubby Jason, who was a fairly laid-back kind of guy, had called her a nagging wife on occasion. (She had usually responded by going off in a huff.) If, however, he'd ever met not-Dorothy, he'd have worshipped Benny as a goddess of self-restraint and placidity.

'You said we didn't have a crystal, babe,' she said, with a stare harder than Paddington Bear's. 'Now I find you had one all the time. Want to tell me about that?'

Benny, of course, didn't want to in the slightest.

'So, after all these years, have you suddenly decided not to trust me? Or is it a bit more than that, huh? There's a lot at stake here, isn't there. Maybe you wanted to keep it all for yourself. I think that's what it must have been, what with you so desperate to get off the planet and all – and you wouldn't have waited for me, now, would you?'

You'd have been on that shuttle and off the planet before I'd parked the car if you'd had the chance.'

'No, I wouldn't have,' said Benny. It wasn't a very good defence, but she wasn't really in the mood.

'Oh no? That's not how it looked to me.'

'Well, you weren't looking very closely then,' snapped Benny, defensively – as she was, of course, lying through her teeth.

'Oh, I think I was,' the girl said. 'There am I, running around trying to track down my errant partner who's allegedly chasing the woman who's stolen our bounty, when a couple of De Vallen's men grab me, drag me through the concourse right in front of all those people, and what do I spy in the distance but you –' and at this point she stuck a vermilion fingernail in Benny's chest – 'with Corporal Rix pulling said bounty out of said errant partner's pocket.'

'Er, what?' replied Benny.

'You were running out on me with the goods, you git!'

Benny sighed. 'I'm so sorry however can I make it up to you.'

The girl grinned then. 'Oh, I'm sure I can think of something,' she said, the fingernail tracking a bit further down Benny's body.

Benny eeped, and slid herself further along the seat.

Unfortunately, the girl followed, and the finger slid down into Benny's lap.

'Aaaargh!' Benny yelled. 'It moved all by itself!'

'What?' said the girl.

Benny didn't answer, being too busy trying to cross her legs, curl into a ball, and pretend nothing was happening.

The girl hurriedly removed her finger and crinkled her nose up. 'What's got into you, babe?'

'Nothing!' said Benny, in possibly a shade higher voice than Dominic usually went for. 'Nothing at all. And that's the way I'd like it to stay, thank you. Would you... just let me think for a bit?' Then she added, 'Babe,' to be conciliatory, though it didn't seem to work. The girl turned her back on Benny and made a show of staring out of the mirrored glass window.

Benny heaved a carefully inaudible sigh of relief, gingerly uncurled herself and settled back to think. Think, that is, about the wider issues, and not any particular unpleasant male bodily happenings that may have made themselves known in the last few minutes.

Right. Um... Her first task was to get the crystal back, without letting the bad guys know that she wasn't one of them. Then she had to get to Brax and get her... oh goddess!

Now she really was distracted. In all the palaver, she hadn't really taken into account one rather big and scary factor. There was a woman out there now who, to all outside intents and purposes, was

Professor Bernice Summerfield. A woman who was really an evil sorceress. And she was going to the Braxiatel Collection.

New top priority: find a way of getting a message to Irving Braxiatel. He had to know about this. Goodness knows what a Benny-impostor might get up to... And then all she could think was: my body is in the hands of someone who once cut off her own head.

* * *

The shuttle attendant was puzzled. He'd not been on this route long, and the ground crew had warned him that there was the occasional eccentric on the trip to the Braxiatel Collection – elderly academics, treasure hunters, that sort of thing. But as the asteroid operated a strict admissions policy, he was told he didn't have to worry about any of them. No dodgy characters; no trouble-makers, guaranteed.

The guarantee didn't seem quite so cast-iron now. This woman...

Her security disk, unbelievably, gave her top-clearance.

Access all areas. Lifetime validity. But here she was, stretched over three seats (having refused to wear a safety belt for takeoff), calling him 'boy' and demanding an endless supply of chocolate and peach juice. She'd asked for mead to start with, and thrown a hissy fit when he'd tried to explain that alcohol was not permitted on the flight. But after some gentle persuasion she'd agreed to try a soft drink, and begun to work her way through the entire menu. If she wasn't keen on a particular juice, he'd discovered, she'd throw it over him and demand another. Thank goodness she'd finally found one she liked.

This journey couldn't go fast enough for him.

They'd reached De Vallen's residence – well, mansion was probably the best description for it. Four storeys tall, and goodness knows how many rooms wide. It wasn't quite Brax's Mansionhouse, but it came a fairly close second, at least from the outside.

The entrance hall was pretty impressive too. Blue-liveried footmen stood to either side, their garb matching the wall coverings and carpet so exactly that they almost blended in, chameleon like, leaving only their faces and white-gloved hands showing.

Benny and the girl were led in like guests of honour. Well, they had an armed escort, anyway.

Chevy and Rix had rejoined them, and now led the way. 'Do you reckon they're taking us to De Vallen?' Benny whispered to her companion.

'Well, duh!' the girl replied.

They were led into a long, narrow hall. Benny thought again of Brax's Mansionhouse, but this time in terms of contrast, not similarity. Whereas Brax had a Hall of Mirrors, this room had not a single

reflective surface. Having no mirrors would not be an uncommon thing, but there was no glass either, and not a scrap of metal. The light came from candles, and even the goblets on a side table were made from mosaic-inlaid pottery.

It could have been a coincidence, of course, but Benny was pretty good at summing up people and looking at the man sitting at the end of the hall, she made a good guess that it was deliberate. If she looked like that, she wouldn't want to be reminded of it every time she faced a shiny surface.

The man was old, and ugly. Benny didn't usually make a habit of judging people because of that sort of thing, but she was reminded of the folk tales of how every evil deed was reflected on a person's face, and an icy dart shooting through her heart made her suddenly certain that this man was shaped entirely by evil: every wrinkle and wart and twisted limb.

The man half-raised a clawed hand in greeting as Benny and the girl were led before him. 'Mr Troy, Ms Prince.'

Hurrah, thought Benny, at least she'd learned something – though addressing one's girlfriend as 'Ms' might be a little bit formal.

The man – obviously De Vallen – turned his crow-bright eyes to Chevy and Rix. 'I understand you have something for me,' he said.

Wordlessly, Chevy moved forward, and opened the box. The contrast between the crystal's sparkling facets and the light-eating surfaces all around made it seem even more radiant than when it was surrounded by all its fellows in the cavern.

The reflected candlelight showed up every flaw in De Vallen's face. Benny almost shivered as he looked back at her, his gleaming eyes seeming to be made of solid white light.

'Congratulations,' he said.

Benny just about persuaded her body to give a nod of acknowledgement.

'Tonight,' he continued, 'you must rest. And tomorrow –' and now he was speaking to Benny alone, 'you will get your reward.'

They had been dismissed. The armed guards had left them alone – although Benny suspected that they would not necessarily find leaving the mansion that easy, apparent guests of honour or not. Probably quite a good thing that she didn't intend to leave just yet, as she had quite enough else to worry about as it was – like how bits of her body jiggled when she jogged up the stairs.

She was following 'Ms Prince', although she had no idea where they were going.

Benny had fallen back as they left the hall, so the girl would take the lead – and she hadn't seemed to hesitate in taking off in this

direction. Benny was assuming from that that this girl and Dominic were frequent visitors to the De Vallen mansion.

The problem came when they reached a fairly imposing wooden door. The girl stood aside to let Benny past. 'Go on, babes, do your stuff.'

'My stuff?' said Benny, warily. That didn't sound like they just had to knock and be let in. Was she supposed to kick the door in? She glanced at the girl. No clues there. She took a few steps back, which could be perceived as her getting ready to take a run-up, or could prompt some hint of what she was really supposed to be doing.

Luckily for the door, Benny's plan worked. 'Where are you going?' the girl asked. 'Don't tell me you've forgotten the code.'

Aha! 'Didn't want to have to tell you,' Benny said, taking in the keypad to one side of the door, 'but I think I have. I was just trying to remember it. That knock on the head, you know...'

Ms Prince sighed exasperatedly. 'Well, how do you expect us to get into our rooms, huh?'

'I don't know,' Benny said. 'Do I have to do everything in this relationship? Can't you do it? The code, I mean.'

The girl looked at her in astonishment. 'Well, yeah, I could.'

'Good –' Benny began, but was interrupted.

'If I, a mere woman and Galamanan, had ever been allowed to know it in the first place, that is.'

'Ah. Yes. Sorry about that.' Bloody hell, Dominic must have been some chauvinist.

'Not your fault, hon,' she said. So, not Dominic the male chauvinist. De Vallen, then?

'What's with that?' she wondered aloud. 'I thought Hera was a matriarchal society. The Knights of the Rowan and all that?'

Ms Prince gave her a very funny look.

Oops. 'Blow to my head...' Benny murmured, pretending to wobble a bit.

'There really wasn't much point in me doing all that boring research on archaeology and Hera, was there, babe? You've forgotten it all already.'

'Ah, yes, of course,' said Benny, putting her vast archaeological brain to work. 'Soul-sucker – decline of trust in the Knights – rise in misogynistic feeling – coup by the blokes. Also suspicion of space travel, due to race memories of the necessity of its destruction, leading to a mistrust of outsiders when new races started to come here. I get it.'

That didn't seem to work. Ms Prince was wide-eyed. 'Er... I think,' added Benny. 'Based on what you told me, that is.' She hastily tried to direct the girl's attention back to the door. 'We could just knock,' she

suggested, miming with her fist.

‘Yeah,’ Ms Prince agreed. ‘And when you’ve remembered the code, we can let ourselves in and come back and answer our knock.’

Benny was still trying to allay suspicion, and so didn’t even begin to be sarcastic back. It was quite difficult. She shrugged, and moved forward to press a random sequence of buttons on the keypad. Well, you never knew, she might happen to hit on the exact combination just by luck.

She didn’t.

Alarms blared out all around them, and a metal grille thudded down behind them. The girl groaned. ‘What the hell did you do that for? We’ll have the interrogators down here now.’

‘Don’t blame me!’ said Benny. ‘What sort of ridiculous system is this? What happens if your finger slips or something?’

‘You haven’t just bumped your head, you’ve lost your mind!’ cried Ms Prince, showing herself to be exceptionally perceptive. But Benny couldn’t enquire further as to the logistics of the security arrangements, because the corridor behind the grille was suddenly full of blue-uniformed guards.

‘Full name and security clearance,’ barked the nearest guard at Benny.

‘Dominic Troy,’ said Benny.

‘Both of you,’ said the guard.

Benny expected the girl to speak, but she didn’t – she was looking at Benny. So was the guard. Women were obviously seen and not heard. That made Benny really cross.

‘This is Ms Prince,’ she snapped. ‘And she can speak for herself, thank you very much.’

‘I said, *full* name, and security clearance!’ yelled the man.

‘Why?’ said Benny. ‘You obviously know who we are. You’re not arresting us. It’s unlikely an intruder would have got this far, and they probably would have been a bit more careful with the door lock. We are extremely important guests of Mr De Vallen, and if you do not get this grille up and open this door within seconds, I shall be forced to tell him exactly how you have treated us, and withdraw our services. And I have no doubt whatsoever that he will hold you entirely to blame.’

To her relief (and, to be perfectly honest, astonishment), the bluff worked. A guard moved away, and the metal gate was raised. Another moved forward to the keypad, and switched off the alarm. ‘To be perfectly safe – and I’m talking about *your* safety here –’ Benny said, ‘it would be as well to program in a new security code. We don’t want any repeats of this... unpleasant incident, do we?’

The guard nodded his agreement, and did so. Benny memorised the

sequence, and resisted the temptation to punch the air and go 'yes!'. It wasn't as if she particularly wanted access to Dominic's rooms, of course, but until she'd got that crystal back she didn't want to raise any more suspicion than was completely necessary. She thought back on the last few minutes. Perhaps she ought to start trying to be inconspicuous too. Hmm.

The wooden door opened, and Benny followed the girl into the corridor beyond. It was rather like a hotel passageway with several doors leading off to one side. The girl went along to the second door, and went through it. Benny kept on following her.

'Hey!' the girl said. 'You've decided to come and join me for a bit, then, babe? Fantastic...'

'A bit of what?' said Benny, alarmed, as the girl turned round and placed her hands caressingly on Benny's shoulders.

'Well, I *meant*, a bit of time,' she purred, 'but if you have any other ideas...'

'No!' yelped Benny, backing off. She sneaked a surreptitious glance around her. This was a very feminine room – or at least, the sort of room that a man might assume a woman would like: pink frilly bits on everything. Double bed, but only one set of pillows, in the centre. So 'Ms Prince's' room. 'I mean, not right now, hon. I'll go to my room, sort myself out. See you in a bit.'

'Yeah, okay,' the girl said. 'I might go and have a sauna or something. Wind down a bit.'

'Good idea,' agreed Benny. She moved towards the door.

The girl looked just slightly puzzled. 'You might as well go through the connecting door, babe.'

'Ah yes,' said Benny. 'Rightio.' She tried hard to look casual as she scanned the room. There were three internal doors. One was probably a bathroom, the other... a wardrobe? With hasty calculations as she tried to recall where the other doors in the corridor had been in relation to this room, she made an educated guess and grasped a door handle. The door was locked. But the key was in the lock, so she turned it. The girl hadn't yet said anything along the lines of: 'Hey, why are you climbing in my wardrobe?', so fingers crossed she was still doing okay.

She opened the door. Another apartment lay on the other side – a much grander affair, in the standard royal blue. Benny, whilst deploring the terribly sexist attitude in this place, was prepared to put up with it for the time being as at least she was being made extremely comfortable.

She shut the door behind her, and flopped down on the kingsize bed. Mmm. She could really do with a good twelve hours sleep. But she just couldn't spare the time. Avril was out there somewhere, and

goodness knows what she was getting up to. If she wasn't going around killing people, she was probably at least destroying Benny's reputation.

Benny glanced round the room. No comms equipment in evidence, and she didn't even have Joseph (and it had to be pretty dire straits before she missed the snotty little ball). But maybe Dominic had something hidden away somewhere...

She pushed herself up off the bed (reluctantly) and began to open drawers. Nothing. Nothing at all. Just clothes and stuff.

And no personal possessions: no papers, or datapads, not even anything to read. So either Dominic was not expecting to stay here for any great amount of time, or he was an extremely private person.

The word 'private', combined with the contents of the drawers, made something else spring to mind. If Benny had to go around in these stupid silk boxers for much longer, she was going to go truly loopy. This was not, as she saw it, comfort. If you had to have... outside things instead of nice tidy inside things, then at least you should make sure they knew their place, and didn't flop about in such an irritating manner. She wondered why size was so important to guys. Surely small would be so much more convenient? Neater, and less inclined to wobble.

Benny had, on the few occasions such things had presented themselves to her, employed the 'underwear test'. It was her view that you could tell a lot about a man from the kind of pants he wore. Silk boxers, in that sense, were a definite

'good'. Scummy Y-fronts with a hilarious caption or picture on the front were very, very definitely bad.

But, just at this moment, she would have given quite a lot for Dominic to have been a Y-front kind of guy.

She decided to have another look. She went back through the drawers, throwing things over her shoulders like an enraged cartoon. If Dominic did have any underwear other than silk shorts, he had hidden them extremely well. Bugger.

But... another idea presented itself. She thought she'd heard a couple of doors open and close. She went over and knocked tentatively on the connecting door. No answer, thank goodness. She eased the door open and tiptoed across the frilly pink room, to the corresponding set of drawers. Nothing in the top one but fluff. In the second one, though, a pile of undies.

Benny checked a label. Size gamma. Considerably smaller than Benny's size, and almost certainly much too small for Dominic's body. But if she nicked a pair with extremely springy elastic it might be okay...

And while she was here...

She looked around. There was a book on the bedside table, and a piece of paper sticking out of it. She picked the book up.

Suddenly, she heard a sound from the corridor. Benny hastily dashed across to the still-open drawer, grabbed a handful of cloth, pushed the drawer shut and ran back to the other room.

She went to lock the door, and realised that the key was on the other side. She backtracked hurriedly. Seconds later the key was on Benny's side, and the door was locked shut. As Benny leant against it, taking deep breaths, she heard someone enter the other room, and then the door handle waggled up and down, making her jump away.

'Dominic? Dommy, are you in there?'

Benny cleared her throat. 'Er, yeah, babes.'

The girl sounded pretty indignant. 'You've locked the door!'

'Er, yeah.'

A sigh. 'Well, could you *unlock* it then?'

Benny dashed into the bathroom and turned on the taps.

'Can't right now, hon, I'm in the bath.'

There was a deep chuckle from the other side of the door.

'Mmm. I decided not to have a sauna after all. Maybe I'll have a bath too.'

Go on, then, Benny willed her. Go take a bath. Leave me alone.

'If you come and let me in, we can take one together...'

'No!' yelled Benny. 'I mean, not now, babes. I'm... too soapy.'

'I'll help wash it off...'

'Don't you ever give up?' Benny muttered under her breath.

Aloud, she called: 'Sorry, can't hear you – got suds in my ears. I'll come and see you when I get out, okay?'

She was splashing so loudly by this point that she genuinely couldn't hear if there was any reply. But she suspected that, if there was, it wouldn't have been very polite.

Deciding not to waste the water, Benny sniffed at a few glass bottles on the side and picked the one that smelled the most like bath oil. She sprinkled a few drops of rose-scented liquid into the bath, and began to undo the buttons of Dominic's shirt.

There was a large wooden cabinet on one wall, and Benny, feeling nosy, opened it. Row after row of jars were crammed on one shelf: moisturisers and powders and a different lotion for each part of the body. On the next shelf: ointments for treating wounds, sticking plaster, healing salves. A shiny black hinged box that she found contained a laser-razor ('No risk of shaving cuts – Guaranteed!'). Tweezers and cotton wool and a manicure set and two dozen different haircare products. And, on the bottom shelf, wrapped in black velvet, a mirror. Benny reached out to take it – and then snatched her hand back. Not now. She wasn't sure she was ready to deal with that just

yet.

She peeled the shirt off, pulled the pendant cord over her neck, and fumbled with the trouser belt, her mind used to shorter, slimmer fingers. Trousers and socks off, and then she shut her eyes as she took off the underpants. Only a day or so ago and she had been imagining what it would be like to take Dominic's clothes off. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought it would be under these circumstances. She wasn't a bashful person, and she had no problems at all with nudity in general – but she really couldn't bring herself to look. This whole situation was just too disturbing. What if it moved while she was looking at it?

She opened her eyes and risked a brief downwards glance in the direction of the bath. It was half-full and the water smelled gorgeous, but the downside of scented oils was that the smelly thing was all they did. No glorious mounds of body-obscuring bubbles were produced. So having turned off the taps she climbed gingerly into the water, draped a towel strategically across the bathtub, and held the book she'd nicked from next door determinedly in front of her eyes. It was called *Women of Myth and Legend*. No prizes for guessing why they'd been reading that.

Benny breathed a sigh of relief as she turned to the flyleaf. In small, neat letters, the words 'Poppaea Prince' were inscribed.

Poppaea. No more 'babes' or 'hons', the girl's name was Poppaea.

Which didn't sound even the tiniest bit like Dorothy. A nickname, perhaps? Popporothy. Poprothy. Porothy. Poppy.

Benny said it out loud, quickly. 'Poppy. Dorothy.' It was possible.

Benny turned to the page marked by the bookmark. Soul-Sucker, The. *Quelle surprise*. She read the entry, taking especial note of the bits underlined in red ink, but it told her nothing she didn't already know, so she began to flick through the rest of the book. Something caught her attention as she whipped through it, and she had to leaf back a few pages. There was another article with red ink marks. She sat looking at it for a while, wondering why. In the end, she came up with two explanations, one simple and one a little bit more complicated, and utterly terrifying.

After some time, she put the book down, got out of the bath and dried herself automatically, too distracted even to notice what she was drying, even when she had to move things around to towel under them.

She was just hoping against hope that it was the simple explanation that was the correct one. But knowing her luck, it wouldn't be. And she couldn't even begin to deal with whose body she might now be in.

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

Ms Jones had always found Professor Summerfield to be one of the more satisfactory residents of the Braxiatel Collection.

Professor Summerfield was, admittedly, by no means perfect, but compared to the coarse Adrian Wall or, worse, the impudent Crofton, she was second only to Irving Braxiatel himself in desirability. Not that Irving was precisely ideal – going off and leaving no working contact number for a start, and sometimes he was extremely lax about signing papers straight away and she had to ask two or even three times – but at least he was clean, tidy, reasonably quiet, and thoroughly respectable. And except for the clean, tidy, quiet and a small bit of the respectability part, Professor Summerfield had almost reached these ideals too.

Up till now.

Ms Jones had a terrible suspicion that it was the influence of A Man. After all, Professor Summerfield had swanned off in the middle of the night with that – admittedly gorgeous (Ms Jones sighed) – Dominic person, without telling a soul, leaving some ridiculous message about checking his security (so quite why had she gone off with him, hmm?), and not even bothering to write Ms Jones a polite note asking her to feed Wolsey and take on responsibility for Irving's Dyamon dagger-fish. Ms Jones had no interest in having pets of her own – after all, she had the Collection to run – but felt strongly that if one did give a home to a living creature, it was one's duty to ensure that it was properly cared for at all times. If Ms Jones had not thought of it for herself, she had no doubt at all that Brax would have come back to find his fish floating upside down on the surface of the ornamental lake, and poor little Wolsey would have been reduced to scavenging for scraps. (Here Ms Jones seriously underestimated 'poor little' Wolsey, whose powers of feline persuasion, not to mention burglary, had ensured he had never gone without a meal in his life.)

Ms Jones had been quite ready to give Professor Summerfield a few well-chosen words on her return. But then...

Professor Summerfield had sloped off the shuttle (not having let Ms Jones know she was returning, not that that was anything unusual), chocolate smeared disgustingly all over her face, *totally* ignored Ms Jones's polite cough as she went through the reception area, and *then* ignored Ms Jones's polite shout of 'Professor Summerfield! A minute, if you please.' Ms Jones had been too stunned by such ill-mannered disregard to see where she had gone after that. The lack of respect was

just too, too distressing. Several hours later, when Ms Jones returned to her own apartments, she had permitted herself to have a small sherry, for the shock.

Adrian Wall was seriously annoyed. That Bernice had gone a bit too far this time. He had a schedule to keep to, and she had the bloody cheek to stick up notices forbidding him from carrying on with his work, or even retrieving his bulldozer, and then sodded off the planetoid. Not that he would normally feel bound to abide by any restrictions placed by Professor Summerfield, but his natural desire to thwart her interests was tempered by his reluctant acknowledgement that Mr Braxiatel, who paid his wages, would probably in this instance agree with her. Brax was funny about not destroying bits of pots and sticks and stuff like that that got dug up every now and again.

And now, Mister Crofton informed him that he'd seen Professor Summerfield back on the Braxiatel Collection, and she hadn't even had the decency to come and see him and let him know what was going on with his worksite. He'd had enough, and was going to have it out with her right now.

Adrian stamped up to the Mansionhouse, so irate that he didn't even wipe his muddy boots on the mat as he went in. Then he remembered that there was every chance he might bump into Ms Jones, and so went back and rectified the omission.

He banged on Professor Summerfield's door, loud enough to let her know he meant business, but not so loud it might attract Ms Jones's attention.

There was no answer, but Mister Crofton had been quite definite that Bernice was here. Adrian knocked again.

Still no answer. Consumed with righteous indignation, he got down on his hands and knees, and lifted up Wolsey's catflap.

And stayed there for several moments, frozen in shock.

Everyone at the Collection knew that Professor Summerfield was not the tidiest of people. It was common knowledge that she used the floor as a wardrobe, while dirty cups and plates lived (and were lived in) under the bed. She often forgot that normal people got up during the day and slept at night, and had been observed with a number of empty bottles beside her.

Looked at like that, Adrian should not have been so surprised at what he saw. But this was... different, somehow. Professor Summerfield had never before seemed quite so... abandoned.

From his prone position, Adrian could only see the top half of Bernice as she lay there asleep. But what he could see was all of that top half. And her wanton position seemed deliberate, not the drunken collapse of an Archaeology Professor who'd failed to find her way to

the bedroom – even though there were a few empties by her side.

And that wasn't the half of it.

Her bed seemed to consist of every pillow and cushion and duvet in the place, all in one big pile on the study floor.

Flickering light indicated that a fire had been lit in the marble fireplace, which had probably contributed to the melting of the pink ice cream that was pooling from an overturned tub on the rug. Adrian's sensitive nose was also detecting a definite scent of peach, although he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

It was his duty to wake her up. Yes, she might be extremely irritated, but (he told himself) he would really be doing her a favour. What if Ms Jones discovered her in this state?

He let the catflap thud back down, and stood to bang on the door again. Still no answer. And despite everything, Adrian didn't really want to earn Brax's wrath for breaking down one of the Mansionhouse doors. Perhaps he'd have to forgo the pleasure of annoying Bernice after all.

Almost as an afterthought, he tried the door handle. The door swung open.

Adrian took a few tentative steps into the study. It wasn't like him to feel hesitant, but for once he wasn't absolutely certain that he was doing the right thing. Somehow, this situation just wasn't normal.

He gave a loud barking cough. There was the tiniest flicker of reaction from the pile of duvets. 'Professor Summerfield?' he growled. 'Time you were getting up.'

She stirred again. Adrian glanced around him, waiting for her to surface. And then he took a step back in amazement, landing his foot right in a sea of strawberry ice cream. It seemed that Professor Summerfield had been burning papers.

The fire had died low, and there were piles of still unburned paper round the outside, covered in Bernice's characteristic scrawling hand. Empty folders lay around, with labels such as

'Repetitive Poems of the Early Ikkaban Period (Revised)', 'The Twentieth Century and What it Was Really Like to Live There', and 'The Lost Tomb of Rablev: The Truth'. Destroying her own research. Didn't sit well with what Adrian knew of Bernice. A darn sight too fond of her academic status, if you asked him; liked shoving her cleverness down other people's throats.

Adrian's ears suddenly pricked up. There was a noise coming from one of the inner doors: a splishing, splashing sound... He strode over to the door and flung it open. A tidal wave of warm, peach-scented bubbles swept through, drenching him from his hairy knees down. He paddled through it, muttering curses under his breath, and turned off the bath taps. By the time he got back to the study he was swearing

loudly.

‘What were you thinking of?’ he yelled. ‘Do you know the damage water can do? And who exactly would have to fix it, you careless, thoughtless...’

But he trailed off.

Yawning, Professor Summerfield had pulled herself up from her bed of pillows, turning to face him. A duvet was clutched in one hand.

And as he stepped towards her, she let it go.

De Vallen was in his private sitting room, alone.

Or so he thought.

He didn’t yet realise that there was someone inside the crystal that he coveted so highly.

He only had a few hours of ignorance left.

The book lay open on the bed that had once been that of Dominic Troy, and was now being used by Professor Bernice Summerfield, just as she was now using his body.

The page being displayed was further on than ‘Soul-Sucker, The’, and was headed ‘Troy, Helen of’.

It continued: ‘In Earth legends, Helen, daughter of Zeus (King of Gods in the Grecian pantheon) and Leda, a mortal, was the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Every man desired her, and she was stolen away from her husband, Menelaus, by Paris of Ilium (the city also known as Troy). The Greeks sailed to Troy to reclaim Helen, but Paris would not let her go. The war between Greece and Troy lasted for ten years, during which time Paris died and Helen married his brother, Deiphobus – only to betray him to the Greeks when they finally took the city. Her one time lover, Menelaus, had sworn to kill Helen for her first treachery that had kept them at war for so long and cost so many lives – but when he saw her again he could not bear to destroy such beauty, and forgave her.’

The words ‘most beautiful’ and ‘Every man desired her’ were underlined, and a bit later, the single word ‘war’. At the bottom of the page, the word ‘NICO’ had been written in capitals, with the final ‘O’ crossed out. In front of it, in lower case, the letters ‘Domi’ had been squashed in.

The simple explanation was this. Dominic Troy – or his girlfriend, Poppy – had, whilst looking up references to the Soul-Sucker, been amused by the coincidence of Dominic’s name resembling that of another extremely beautiful person.

They’d marked the page and written his name at the bottom to show that.

But an alternate explanation – possibly far-fetched? – was that Dominic Troy was not the beautiful man’s real name.

Perhaps, in searching for an alias, he had come across this article, and had seen in it parallels to his own situation. And perhaps, therefore, he had taken the name for his own.

Perhaps his real given name was Nico, and doodling on this page he had come up with a similar alternative.

It could all be a coincidence. It definitely was a bit far-fetched. And Benny would have put it out of her head immediately, if it wasn't that she also knew, somewhere in the scraps of memory at the back of her mind, that quite recently she'd heard of a man called Nico Lyence, also called the 'Fifth Axis Gigolo', who was rumoured to be the most gorgeous guy in the galaxy. He was also rumoured to have been killed when the Axis troops had had to evacuate the Galamanus system after the loss of the Sixth Fleet.

Benny now had a horrid feeling that those rumours had been greatly exaggerated.

Walk Like a Man, Talk Like a Man

Benny got dressed. She had quite a job getting Poppy's knickers on, and even with them things still had a tendency to move around a bit more than she was comfortable with, and there was a definite list to one side, so she sorted things out once and for all by securing everything firmly in place with a large quantity of sticking plaster. It turned out that Dominic was rather a large lad. And although she was finding it exceptionally annoying in many ways, Benny had to admit that she was quite pleased really that if she had to be a man, at least she was a well-endowed one. It sort of made up for her having virtually no breasts when she was a woman.

Benny had picked out a pair of billowing black silk trousers and a wraparound red shirt that contrasted spectacularly with Dominic's pale skin, and was just lacing up the knee-high boots when the main door opened. Benny inwardly cursed herself for not checking it when she'd locked the connecting door.

It was Poppy. 'Hon, have you seen...' she began, then stopped, obviously spotting her book, with paper bookmark replaced, now on Benny's bedside table. 'Oh,' she went on, sounding puzzled, 'there it is.'

'I just fancied something to read in the bath,' Benny said hastily. 'Knew you wouldn't mind.' She picked it up and handed it back to the girl.

Poppy smiled, though she still looked a bit confused. 'No, of course not,' she said. 'It's just not like you, that's all.'

'Oh, I like a change,' said Benny. 'After all... sometimes it's essential.' They exchanged knowing smiles. Not a good sign.

Poppy didn't drop the eye contact. 'I've missed you, babes.'

Her look was very intense, and Benny had no doubt at all what the girl was telling her.

She laughed in a jolly sort of way. 'Well, obviously I've missed you too.' And then she yawned theatrically. 'It's so lovely to see you again – Poppy – but I really am extremely tired, so...'

Poppy just slinked closer. 'Don't keep teasing me, hon,' she murmured, reaching her arms up around Benny's neck and leaning in to kiss it.

Then she drew back slightly. 'Hey babe, where's your pendant?'

Benny frowned, looking down at herself, and then realised what the

girl was talking about. ‘Oh, I must have left it on the bathroom floor,’ she said.

‘Well, don’t forget to put it back on,’ Poppy said, though the last words were a bit muffled as she was back at Benny’s neck again.

Benny’s body started to feel... weird.

She knew when she was sexually attracted to someone. And, nice though Poppy might turn out to be (although, actually, considering the circumstances, that was quite unlikely), that wasn’t the case here. Not her type at all.

But this body didn’t seem to agree.

A body with a mind of its own?

Benny tried to back off, but Poppy’s arms were locked in place and she was just dragged along too. In despair – because she had never been able to empathise with Mata Hari and her kind and just couldn’t – *couldn’t* – go along with things when she didn’t feel that way towards the person, however important it might be, and anyway it would be a bit of a giveaway as the girl would almost certainly notice the difference between a sexually-experienced man and someone who’d never done it like that before and would have to just shove stuff in any old how and hope for the best – Benny scooped Poppy up off the floor and deposited her on the bed, undoing the girl’s death grip as she leaned over her.

‘This is more like – hey!’ called the girl as Benny ran into the bathroom.

‘Er... sorry!’ Benny called back. ‘Thought I’d better pick up my pendant before I forget!’ She leant against the door, trying to remember the last time she’d had to run away from an amorous pursuer. It had been quite a while, of that, at least, she was sure. This body inspired a reaction in others that she’d never encountered for herself.

She found the pendant on the floor, and slung it back round her neck. Then she went over to the cabinet, and drew out the velvet-wrapped mirror. It took her a few seconds to pluck up the courage to remove the covering and look at herself.

Staring at Dominic’s reflection, she could understand how one person’s face could be responsible for the fall of Troy. He was truly beautiful.

‘Ow!’ She suddenly felt a tiny stab of pain. ‘Owl’ And another... something very weird was happening to her.

Or rather... to Dominic’s body.

Earlier, the body had reacted instinctively to Poppy’s touch.

Now it seemed that it was tuned into Benny’s mind as well.

And Benny – much as she hated to admit it – couldn’t help but think that Dominic was devastatingly attractive.

And unfortunately, the sticking plaster was very, very sticky.

‘Owwwwww!’

With desperation borne of extreme sensitivity, Benny scrabbled at the ties at her waist and the trousers fell to her ankles. Another yell, as she tried to decide between the quick agonising rip or the slow excruciating tug, and just found more pain.

There was a call from the other side of the other side of the door. ‘Dommy! Dommy, are you okay?’

‘Yes *ow!*’ replied Benny.

‘Let me in!’

‘No, I’m perfectly okay *aaargh!*’

‘If you don’t let me in I’m going to knock the door down!’

‘I told you, I’m perfectly o-’

But Poppy had kicked the door in.

The small girl stood looking at Benny, expressionless. Benny tried to look unconcerned, as if being found with her trousers round her ankles and plaster over her privates was a perfectly ordinary everyday occurrence, and absolutely nothing to make a fuss about.

After a few moments, Poppy finally spoke. ‘Are those my knickers?’ she said.

‘Er, yes?’ said Benny. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Dommy,’ Poppy said, ‘I think I might sleep in my own room tonight.’

‘Okay!’ said Benny, cheerfully. ‘Oh, by the way –’

‘Yes?’

She shot out the question she was almost dreading the answer to. ‘Do you find it difficult, remembering to calling me “Dommy” all the time?’

The girl raised an eyebrow. ‘Not when there’s ten million dollars at risk, I don’t.’

‘You don’t ever almost call me “Nico”?’

A puzzled laugh. ‘No. You taught me not to do that.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Benny.

Poppy left the bathroom, and Benny heard the door into the corridor open and close behind her. And she realised that following that almost-definite confirmation, there was absolutely no pressing need to remove the sticking plaster any more. But she decided to have another bath and soak it off anyway.

The hours flew past. Benny had so much to think about.

She was laying on her back on the big double bed, trying to dredge up every scrap of memory she’d ever possessed about Nico Lyence.

There weren’t very many of them. She had a vague recollection that he came from some poor background, but he’d used his extraordinary

looks to advance his position. Not an usual story. What made it a bit more unusual, made it stick in the mind more, were two things. One, was that Nico had – allegedly – never allowed his image to be captured. To experience his beauty, one had to possess the man himself.

And so many people had wanted to possess him, it had led to the second factor – war. The ‘Fifth Axis Gigolo’, he’d been called – whether he’d slept his way to the top, Benny obviously didn’t know, but he’d been desired. And the people Nico had found himself with – by accident or by design? – who were therefore the ones who desired him, were the warmakers of the Fifth Axis. Not that they called themselves warmakers, oh no, they were ‘Empire Builders’ or something equally virtuous-sounding, which failed to mention all the worlds they subjugated by force.

And more than one Fifth Axis troop, and consequently civilian settlement – so it was said – had been the victim of

‘friendly fire’, as one commander had taken Nico from another, or satisfied Nico’s desires – a whim for a possession, or a place, or revenge for some slight. And finally – the rumours would have it – the devastating terrorist attacks on Galamanus – supposedly the farewell gesture of the populous to speed the evacuating force on its way, but really, it was said, ordered by the very upper levels of the Axis (levels which had no all-controlling passion for a handsome face) to get rid of such an insidious, destructive influence. And so Nico Lyence had died, his perfect form torn into ugly shreds by an official bomb.

Allegedly.

And Benny gradually drifted into sleep, dreaming a dream where she was holding a sword over her own head and was about to cut it off when suddenly Dominic ran in and yelled,

‘Give it back! Give it back!’

She awoke with a start. That was what came of falling asleep in all your clothes on top of the bed, rather than tucked in with a hot milky drink and a teddy bear. Benny looked at the clock and realised it was the middle of the night. Which seemed an exceptionally good time for sneaking around the place and looking for crystals. Or at least a comms unit.

There was no light showing underneath the connecting door, which hopefully meant Poppy was asleep, but there was a faint glimmer coming through the crack below the corridor door – enough to guide her there in the dark, anyway. Benny eased herself to the floor, and tiptoed across the room. She turned the door handle slowly... slowly... and pulled the door towards her without letting it go. Dim wall lights were spaced along the corridor outside, and she was able to creep along to the main door with no risk of tripping over unseen obstacles.

She was repeating the door code over and over in her mind – no more alarms for her, thank you.

But, when she reached the door, she found there was no keypad. She looked all around, getting down on her knees to check the lower wall and standing on the tips of toes to examine the area above. Nothing. Nada. Not a single, solitary sausage. The door didn't even have a handle. It looked suspiciously like they were prisoners.

Bugger.

Even more bugger – Poppy's door was opening. 'I thought I heard you sneaking about,' the girl said.

'Well, you were right,' snapped Benny, tired, grumpy and frustrated, and in absolutely no mood to be conciliatory or pretend to be someone else. 'Congratulations, you have wonderful hearing for your age.'

Poppy obviously wasn't in a very good frame of mind either.

'I thought you might be out hunting for other people's underwear to steal.'

'Oh ha ha,' said Benny. 'I was actually looking for a way out of here.'

'Like I believe that,' Poppy sneered (Benny observed that Poppy's usual 'babes' and 'hons' were noticeable for their absence in the conversation so far). 'You know perfectly well there's no way out; we explored every possible avenue our first night here.'

'We might have missed something,' retorted Benny, who obviously knew nothing of the kind.

'What I think,' said Poppy, striding towards Benny with her hands on her hips, 'is that there's something exceedingly fishy going on here.'

'No there isn't!' yelled Benny, absolutely keeping her cool.

'Oh, I think there is,' Poppy went on, 'I think there's something very dodgy indeed. I think, now we're so close to our goal, you're getting cold feet about sharing. You're trying to drive me away with weird behaviour and an exceedingly peculiar sense of humour so you get all the booty yourself.'

Benny laughed with relief.

'Glad I'm so funny,' Poppy snapped.

'Oh, it's just my exceedingly peculiar sense of humour,' said Benny. She really had thought Poppy was about to blow the whistle – and any chance Benny had of getting her own body back. In fact, she felt so relieved that she felt almost friendly towards the girl. She put her hands on to Poppy's shoulders, and smiled. 'I have no intention whatsoever of keeping all the money,' she said, glowing inwardly with a childlike satisfaction in telling the exact truth. 'And I'm most definitely not getting cold feet.'

Poppy's face finally cracked into a smile, and she fell forward into Benny's arms. 'Right. Yeah. I shouldn't have doubted you, hon.'

'Yeah,' agreed Benny. 'Well, I'm glad that's settled. So, it's time to go back to bed again, I think.'

Poppy gave a wicked giggle. 'I definitely shouldn't have doubted you, hon.'

'I meant,' said Benny, trying to remember how to do her friendly not-tonight-Jason attitude rather than automatically adopting the defensive ugh-a-girl-I-don't-know-is-trying-to-get-me-into-bed position, 'separate beds.'

Poppy took a step back, frowning again. 'This just isn't like you, babe.'

Rekindled suspicion. Just what Benny didn't need. 'Sorry... er, babe,' she said. 'Got to keep a clear head for the morning, you know. Don't want to wreck all our chances by losing it at the final hurdle.'

'I've never known you nervous before,' Poppy said, sounding a bit puzzled. 'Even when the bombs were dropping all you were worried about was breaking a fingernail.'

Benny took a deep breath. She was finding herself feeling sorry for this girl, consort of a war criminal though she was.

Benny'd done worse when she'd been in love. Well, maybe not worse. But almost as inexcusable, perhaps.

And what Benny was doing now was pretty damn inexcusable. This girl's lover was dead, and she didn't know it.

She thought he was alive, and that they'd pulled off some great coup, and were going to live happily ever after.

How could Benny do this to her? Abruptly, she said, 'What would you do without me?'

Poppy laughed. 'If you're trying to get me to say you're indispensable, you'll have to try a damn sight harder than that.'

'So I'm not?'

'Hey babes! You and me against the world, remember?'

Oh buggery bollocks. Benny had to think about this. 'I really should go back to bed, babe.'

She smiled slightly. 'Can't argue with that.'

'My head's still aching,' Benny said, not wanting to go through all that again.

Poppy grinned, but it was a bit hesitant, not with the self-assurance of earlier. 'I'll soon take your mind off that.'

Benny shook her head. 'I don't think so. I really need some rest.' And then, because she was feeling guilty, 'Sorry. I do care.'

And then she went back to Dominic's room, leaving Poppy standing in the corridor, staring after her.

Benny lay down carefully on the bed.

It was hard to deal with rejection. She'd been there herself.

The early stuff, the person you fancied not fancying you back – well, that was pretty horrible. It could be upsetting, and she remembered having the odd cry about things like that back in the mists of time. You wondered what was wrong with you, and sometimes you went to huge lengths to try to get the other person to change their mind. You'd gaze at a holoprint of them, and play at signing your 'married' name. Then as you got older, it still hurt, but you could put it into perspective just that little bit more, and tell yourself it was their hard luck; they didn't know what they were missing.

But later rejection...

When you were with someone, and saw the light die in their eyes. When you knew they didn't care any more, but tried to pretend it wasn't happening. When they didn't seem interested in what you had to say. They were making up excuses to keep you out of their bed, not get you into it. And even if they said the curse, 'It's not you, it's me', you knew it was you. Because they'd cared for and craved you once, and to know they didn't any more – that they didn't desire you and ache for you or even want you around – then it had to be you.

It was the deepest rejection of them all, when they knew you and had explored all your potential and had declared it unworthy. The sort of thing that can destroy you inside. Kill your confidence, sabotage your peace of mind.

And she'd just done that to Poppy.

Question: what was the most painless way for a relationship to end?

Answer: you are joking, aren't you?

Possible scenario without Benny's intervention: Dominic and Poppy are carrying out their scam, happily skipping about, being in love. Dominic trots off down into some crystal caves, and his mind is sucked out. Poppy finds the mindless, good-as-dead body. Now, she wouldn't have liked that very much, would she? She'd have got really upset, probably. So Benny had actually done her a service in saving her from that hideous discovery. (Oh, keep fooling yourself, Bernice.) But now... well, if Benny were to succeed in nabbing the crystal, she'd be out of there with all speed. Poppy would think that Dominic had betrayed her and done a bunk. She'd hate him for ever. Was that fair?

Well no. But life, Benny said to herself, attempting to make it sound especially insightful, isn't fair.

But would Poppy also hate herself for ever? Would that be better or worse than the whole grief/finding-mindless-body thing? Frankly, so what if it was doing Dominic a disservice to make his girlfriend think he was the betraying type – did Benny actually know that he wasn't? Nope. Let's face it, a war criminal's morals probably weren't that

snowy white. And, as he was a git who had happily tried to kill Benny, she needn't worry about him at all. But what had this girl ever done to her?

Nothing, apart from falling for the wrong guy. And whatever Benny did it was going to break her heart.

So Benny would have to steel her own (metaphorical) heart and just get on with the action, and stop thinking so much.

Definitely no more thinking about Dominic, insofar as she could manage that what with having his body and all.

Give it back.

Erk? Benny sat up suddenly, eyes darting around the room.

There was no one there, but she knew that anyway. The voice had been inside her head.

She quickly examined the palms of her hands. No hairs. Well, that was something. Although, of course, would the madness show up on the body that was housing the mind or the body to which the mind belonged? Maybe Avril, wherever she was, was suddenly having to contend with hairy palms. Ha! That cheered Benny up for a microsecond.

Then she thought: hairy palms. They'd help her grip the sword better, when she went to cut off her own head...

She shivered, and hopped off the bed to get undressed, proving to herself how brave she was by not even slightly averting her eyes. Gosh, Dominic did have a nice body...

Give it back.

This wasn't funny.

Shivering, and pretending to herself it was because she was cold, she dived into bed and pulled the covers up to her shoulders. Ha! Her shoulders..

Give it back.

Of course, she knew exactly whose voice it was.

Oh shit.

'Adrian. Braxiatel here. Yes, I got back an hour or so ago. I went to your office but you weren't there. Ah, I see. No, no problem, no need to hurry back. I couldn't help but notice that you have a framed holoprint of Professor Summerfield on top of your filing cabinet. Ah, I see. Fine. No, no, I understand. I'll see you later, yes. Goodbye.'

Enforced (Fruitful) Insomnia

Four hours later, and Benny was still awake. It wasn't through choice. Or to put it another way, it was.

She was trying desperately hard to stay awake, while desperately, desperately wanting to go to sleep.

Dominic wanted his body back, and Benny didn't want to give it to him. If she fell asleep... well, look what had happened the last time.

She must not fall asleep.

She must not lose control.

She was walking round the room, very, very slowly. She was so tired that she didn't dare risk staying still. She tried to occupy her mind with word games, things that required her to concentrate, but she got to 'F' in naming a sort of fruit for every letter of the alphabet and then got stuck. Her mind drifted (though thankfully not literally) to the crystal. She *had* to get it back, had to, had to, but... would her resolve stand up to it? Half asleep, presented with a hypnotic crystal and it'd be wham bam welcome back Dominic.

Fat lot of use this room was. She'd been through every cupboard and every drawer and had come to the reluctant conclusion that there were no caffeinated beverages to be found anywhere. For someone who virtually lived on coffee most of the time this was bad news in any case, but right now it was a tragedy. She'd been drinking glass after glass of water – that was supposed to freshen you up, she knew, but that probably applied more to a person who was feeling a bit heavy after a long business lunch than someone who hadn't slept for over twenty-four hours and had to stay awake in order to stop a dispossessed spirit taking them over. The other problem was it meant she kept needing the loo – which, on one hand, did at least keep her awake, but on the other, rather freakier hand, meant she had to keep... well, you know. Which was admittedly very handy, but just... weird. She felt a bit freaked out every time she tried to touch her... new accessories.

Ridiculous how right now she couldn't even bring herself to use any biological terminology; really, Bernice, she thought, are you from the Dark Ages or what? Although she had found the whole male peeing thing to be quite a revelation on the whole.

At least she was learning something.

Adrian Wall was wandering around the building site in a daze.

He didn't hear the warning shout as a slate was dropped off a roof, but it bounced off his tough Killoran hide unremarked. He wouldn't have noticed any extra stars swimming round his head.

Adrian was in love, and he couldn't quite believe it.

He'd always acknowledged that Professor Summerfield was a very attractive human. However her personality had previously got in the way.

But now... He thought of her stepping towards him, taking his hand, shushing his protests... taking charge. She seemed suddenly more confident, but at the same time less arrogant – no longer so condescending to him, a mere non-academic labourer. And the look in her eyes – why had he never realised before how much she needed him, wanted him? Why had he never realised before that he felt the same way?

His mind drifted into the future – to the day when the love of his life became Professor Bernice Wall.

He knew that what he had to do now was ask her.

Fig! That was it, a fruit beginning with 'F'! Finally. Finally, a fig. A final fig. A final fruit. Fig, a fruit, a final fruit; ray a drop of golden...

No, wrong... wrong whatever. What was she doing? Oh yes. G. A fruit beginning with 'G'. Ummm...

The golden apple that Aphrodite, Athene and Hera contended for! Woo! Spooky coincidence. She was on a planet named for the Goddess of Women, and she wasn't one.

Woman, that was. No, that wasn't a coincidence. It was one of those other things. Irony. That was it. Irony. Iron... nice ironed sheets on the bed which she could just lie down on and...

No! Fruit! Think of fruit! Golden apple didn't really count. It wasn't a proper breed of fruit. Was breed the right word?

Doesn't matter. Golden apple didn't matter. After all, if she couldn't cheat at a game inside her head, when could she cheat?

Well, never. Cheating was just wrong. As she'd tried to explain to Jason once when he'd nicked two 500 shilling Monopoly notes from the bank and put hotels on Io and Ganymede while she'd nipped to the loo. Mind you, she'd still won in the end. She always did.

Greengage! Yes!

H... huckleberry? Was that a real berry, or just the name of a boy in a book? Actually, it was probably a nickname, due to him, um, having something to do with huckleberries. So that was all right then.

I...

It's my body: How dare she take it. Mine, it's mine, it's mine. I'm nothing without it. I will get it back. I will. I will.

Indigo Drigfruit. (Good in a pie. With custard.) jujube.

Kumquat.

Lemon. Or lime.

Magnificent musk melon.

Every inch of that body is perfect. Every hair is trimmed to the exact right length; every nail is filed and buffed; every pore is cleansed; every muscle honed. Perfection.

And now that slobby cow has it; bumping my shins on the bedposts, snagging a nail, reading a book without bothering to put gloves on and risking paper cuts. She hasn't even bothered to moisturise.

She deserves to die.

And all I need her to do is fall asleep.

Nectarine.

Orange.

Passion... fruit.

...Quince...

...Red... curr...

Co to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep little baby; Co to sle-eep, go to sleep, won't you gently close... your... eyes?

Mmm...

That's it. Eyes shutting. Co to sleep. Give it back.

‘Noooooooooooooooo!’

Benny threw herself off the bed with a scream. She dashed to the bathroom and turned the bath's cold tap on full, and stuck her head right under it.

‘I'm awake! I'm awake! You can't have it back!’

When she finally pulled her head out from under the freezing jet, she could hear Poppy banging on the connecting door.

‘I'm all right, babes,’ she called out. ‘It was just a nightmare.’

‘Let me come in!’ the voice came back. ‘You need me!’

‘I'm going to be fine now,’ Benny said. ‘Honestly. Co back to bed.’

It seemed the girl did; Benny heard no more.

Oh well, at least she was well and truly wide awake now.

Dominic was cursing. He wouldn't have another opportunity again for a while. He let his mind drift back to the crystal.

De Vallen, the ugly little gnome, was grasping the crystal in his revolting, liver-spotted hands and muttering to it. All Dominic had to do was regain his own body, collect his reward, and then thank all the

gods that he'd never have to set eyes on this unsightly individual ever again.

His reward...?

A word leapt out from the old man's mumblings.

'Only a few hours... only a few hours till I get my reward... till I give him his reward, ha ha ha! They'll think he's inheriting it all, but they won't know just how much of mine he's getting! We'll shoot him down, my pretty, and then I'll be young again!'

Dominic felt horribly sick – however that was possible with no stomach. De Vallen was... was – he could hardly bring himself to shape the thought – going to use the crystal to take over his, Dominic's, body. The idea of that... that *troglo-dyte* possessing him... it was too horrific even to consider.

But... could he use this to his advantage? If Bernice did not succumb to sleep before the morning, then this would be the perfect opportunity to snatch his body back.

De Vallen was planning to shoot him – that is, Dominic's body – with a stun weapon, presumably. Lower the resistances, just as he had lowered Bernice's before with the drugged brandy. Use the crystal to pull the mind from the body, and then De Vallen would substitute his own. Dominic shivered.

Even Bernice, with her carelessness and lack of moisturiser, was better than this gargoyle who was right now using the Soul-Sucker's crystal to scratch between his legs.

But De Vallen would be unpractised at placing his mind into other people's bodies, and he was ancient and slow. Dominic had no doubt he could force his way in before the old man could. And all he'd have to do would be hold out until the stun wore off – which, logically, would only be a very short period of time, because De Vallen, expecting to be inhabiting the body himself, would not want to be out of it that long, or risk Dominic fighting back.

In fact... in fact, this plan would work out even better for Dominic than snatching his body back from Bernice during the night. It sounded as if De Vallen was planning on signing his whole fortune over to Dominic, in preparation for 'becoming'

(shiver) Dominic himself – if Dominic took his body back before then, he'd either have to flee as soon as they unlocked the door, or risk De Vallen shooting him; this way he'd get back his own body *and* have De Vallen's entire fortune!

Dominic – in so far as he could – settled down. He would watch every move that De Vallen made; figure out every aspect of his plan. And when the moment came, he would be ready.

Upstairs, oblivious to all of this, Professor Bernice Summerfield thought of strawberries and tangerines, and then fell fast asleep.

Benny woke up with a cry as someone banged at the door. 'Just a moment,' she called, sleepily, rolling off the bed and struggling into a shirt. She staggered over to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open a crack. 'Yes?'

The uniformed man on the other side informed her that De Vallen would grant Dominic an audience in fifteen minutes, in order to give him his reward. The guard would call back in ten minutes to escort him there.

Benny grunted her understanding, and shut the door.

Then realised that she still had Dominic's body. Which meant that (a) it hadn't all been a dream, and (b)... somehow she'd managed to fight Dominic's mind off in her sleep? Goddess, she must be stronger-willed than she'd thought. Well, well done her, that's all she could say. And phew, too.

She'd forgotten to lock the door again, as she realised when Poppy walked in.

'Any more nightmares, babe?' the girl asked.

'No,' Benny said. 'The rest of the night seems to have been fine.'

'I heard the guy at your door. Didn't bother to summon me. Guess they think I'll just follow you wherever.'

'Well, that's true, isn't it?' said Benny, tactlessly.

The girl frowned at first, then shrugged. 'Yeah. 'Spose it is.'

A pause. 'Hey, hadn't you better get your glad rags on? They'll be back in a min.'

Poppy obviously wasn't going anywhere. Benny tried to ignore her intent gaze as she pulled on a pair of those irritating silk boxer shorts, a clean shirt and trousers and Dominic's black pendant and, because Poppy held them out to her, a pair of black leather gloves.

'There,' Benny said. 'Just got to clean my teeth and I'm ready.'

She popped into the bathroom, splashed some cold water on herself at the same time, and then went back out to Poppy.

'You've not shaved, hon,' the girl said.

'Errr,' said Benny, who hadn't even thought of it and didn't have a clue how to use a laser-razor anyway, 'I'm trying a new look. You know, macho stubble and all that.'

From the look of disbelief on Poppy's face that excuse wasn't very in character, but Benny was finding it hard to care. Just a little while longer, and she'd be out of this stupid guest suite.

Able to find the crystal. Able to get out of here, and go after Avril.

Able to get her own body back, where the only stubble she had to worry about was much lower down and you could hide it with sleeves

and trousers anyway.

She'd never moan about having to shave her bits again, if she could only have her own body back.

Twenty men were gathered in De Vallen's private chamber, as well as De Vallen himself. Dominic recognised most of them, they were the cream of De Vallen's personal staff, the Chiefs and Head Whatever.

De Vallen was speaking.

'As you all know, my health has been failing. I am no longer young. I have no son. Perhaps you have been wondering who shall run my empire when I am gone?'

There were murmurs of denial from the audience, but De Vallen silenced them with a raised hand.

'It is of no importance. The matter has now been decided. Many of you will have met Dominic Troy. He has performed an exceptional task for me, and I intend to reward him suitably. From today, Dominic Troy is your master. I have signed over my entire estate to him, and you will serve him body and soul as you have done me. You will obey him without question. I believe that the end for me is not far off – it may be this very day.'

You're right, thought Dominic, as the various men pretended to be shocked and distressed. Today will be the end for you. I'll see to that.

As they left the room, the Heads and Chiefs were muttering to each other, confused. 'Did you see?' they were saying. 'Did you see? He had a mirror in there... What can that mean?'

Benny thought Poppy was remarkably calm when the guard told her that De Vallen only required Dominic's presence. She meekly agreed to stay behind in the guest wing, merely asking if he would mind sending someone in with breakfast for her.

The guard, who'd obviously been expecting to get a good kicking when he broke the news, was only too happy to agree.

Now the guard was leading Benny through the corridors, to De Vallen's personal quarters. She was nervous and tired, but hyped up on adrenalin. This was it. This was where she got the crystal.

She didn't really have a plan, because she didn't know what was going to happen. De Vallen would hand over a cheque, she'd ask to admire the crystal one last time before leaving, grab it, knee him in the nuts and scarper? That was the best she could manage; she'd have to do it on the hoof. She'd filled her pockets with as many improvisational weapons as she could find in Dominic's room – a metal nail file, a pen, a small bottle of acidic stain remover (which could be thrown in a face as a last resort). Nothing that would do her much good, but it felt better to be prepared, however slightly.

The guard stopped outside an ornate wooden door. 'You're to go in alone,' he said.

Better and better, thought Benny. The less guards, the easier this is going to be. She took a deep breath. Hello Mr De Vallen, could I just have a look at that crystal again? Mr De Vallen, I really appreciate you hiring me, and could I see the crystal to remind me of what brought us together in this mutually-profitable partnership? Ooh, is the crystal round here somewhere? I wouldn't mind seeing that ol' thing just one more time.

'Mr De Vallen,' she began with a smile, shutting the door behind her and holding out a hand.

He didn't extend his in return, but gestured for her to sit down in a chair facing him. Benny did so, and gasped. There on the table between them was the crystal. Should she just grab it now and leg it?

No.

Because De Vallen was pointing a gun at her.

Dominic had watched De Vallen drain the contents of a small crystal phial; seen him shudder in distaste. He'd seen the revolting little gargoyle take a long look in a mirror.

He'd watched as the door opened and Bernice Summerfield had walked in. He cringed at the way she walked – no style, no grace. He almost exploded when he saw that she had let stubble – coarse, ugly stubble! – sully the perfection of his face.

The bitch deserved to be shot.

And now De Vallen was pointing a gun at her. Co on, Dominic pleaded. Co – *on!*

De Vallen's finger was tightening on the trigger, and Bernice was jumping up but too late, far too late... She was down, without a sound.

De Vallen was picking up the crystal, holding it in front of Bernice's face. This was it...

The door crashed open.

'Think you could just cut me out, you cheating gits?'

Poppy, stay out of this! Let him displace Bernice!

But, of course, she couldn't hear him.

'What have you done? Dommy? Dommy, answer me!'

It's not me, you idiot!

Where am I?

She's out! She's out! It's mine again!

Oh Goddess, I know exactly where I am.

My body, my body...

Oh no you don't. I'm not becoming a bodiless spirit for anyone.

Back I go...

No! It's mine! Let me in!

Not this time, 'hon'. I've learnt my lesson. Guess you can control things better if you've done this before. And I think the stunning is wearing off right about now, which means I am going to have full command of things any second now. And you are not getting this body back until I have mine.

If you let me have my body back I'll find yours...

And if the moon were made of green cheese we'd never run out of sandwich filling. I don't think so.

'Dommy? Dommy, wake up!'

'Uh... gg... cr...'

'It's all right, I've stunned the old guy. Now let's get out of here before the guards wake up!'

'Cr...! Cr...!'

She's telling you to take the crystal, baby, Dominic thought.

Shame you can't understand her.

He watched as Poppy helped his body – inhabited still by Bernice Summerfield – out of the room. He didn't follow. He had to stay with the crystal. Find a way of using it. It wasn't as if De Vallen was going to be able to do much with it. The poison should be taking effect by now; the little goblin's way of ensuring there'd be no spare bodies lying around for Dominic's spirit – *if* his scheme had gone to plan. Dominic really hoped that the old man could feel the agony of the poison, even stunned.

Ha! De Vallen was stirring, coming out of the stun. And his face was contorting in pain. Good! Let him suffer! How dare he plot to take the body of Nico Lyence?

A guard was crawling in now. Poppy must have stunned him too, the clever girl. Dominic watched them for a few minutes, De Vallen and the guard. It was a while before either of them could speak. The guard was first, having been stunned earlier.

He was babbling apologies for having let Poppy take his gun, let her get past him. De Vallen was ignoring him, staring at the mirror and looking horrified. Then he managed to croak a few words. His face was turning blue, much to Dominic's delight.

And what he said was, 'Make... amends. Look into... the crystal.'

The guard did so. After a few seconds, he went rigid, hypnotised by its power. His mind would be dragged into the crystal, trapped there. De Vallen was staring into the crystal too, freeing his own spirit.

But Dominic was going to fill the void first.

He felt the pins and needles of his body as it was recovering from the stun, and it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. De Vallen was looking blankly ahead, his mind still gone – and then his eyes blinked. 'How... did... you... do... that?' he rasped.

'Bernice was right,' Dominic smiled. 'It gets easier with practice.'

Shame you're never going to get the chance to find out for yourself, old man.'

'An... ti... dote...' the old man wheezed.

Dominic laughed. 'I don't think so!' The pins and needles had almost gone now. He picked up the glass phial and sniffed gingerly inside. 'Oh, nasty. Quite a painful death you had in store for me.' He reached forward and grabbed the crystal.

'And don't think you can store your mind in here. This is mine now.'

He turned as he reached the door, crystal safely tucked inside a pocket. De Vallen was choking now. He seemed to be trying to say something.

And then he gave a final spasm, and slumped back in his chair.

Still laughing, Dominic shut the door behind him.

Now he just had to find Bernice.

Mirror Image

They were almost out of the mansion by the time Benny recovered the power of speech. She'd noted with some amazement that everyone they passed was extremely deferential to her, and called her 'sir'. Poppy hadn't had to shoot any of them. This was good. Especially as they were about to go back the way they'd come.

'You're joking!' Poppy yelled. 'Our luck's held out this far, but we'll never make it all the way back there and out again! And I don't think this thing has much charge left in it.' She waved the gun at Benny.

'We have to get the crystal,' Benny said. 'And I'm not arguing about it.'

'Well, I am! What is wrong with you, hon? First you act all weird, then I think you're trying to do me out of my share...'

'Which I wasn't, as I've already explained,' said Benny, who was fed up with having to think up excuses for Dominic.

'Yeah, yeah, I know, sorry – but now you want us to go back for the thing that got us into trouble in the first place!'

'Exactly!' said Benny. 'We went to all this trouble to get it... and it's worth a lot of money, you know – it'd set you – us – up for life!' If this woman was a mercenary, appeal to her mercenariness. Was that a word?

'Okay, okay. But if anything goes wrong...'

'It's my fault yada yada yada. Come on.'

As they turned, a guard stepped out of the corridor behind them. 'Nice of you to offer to take the blame, Bernice,' he said – drawing the crystal out of his pocket.

'Oh goddess!' Benny yelled, realising what must have happened. 'Shoot him! Quick!'

The guard began to shout: 'No! Pop-'

And Poppy shot him.

She turned a puzzled eye to Benny. 'Why did that guard call you Bernice?' she said. 'Wasn't that the woman on –' ... '–on Braxiatel, yes it was. Don't know. Guess he was confused. It doesn't matter, we've got the crystal!'

Benny plied the guard's – Dominic's – rigid fingers from the crystal, and breathed a sigh of relief. Now she had this... all she had to do was find Avril, or get word to Brax somehow.

All she had to do. She really didn't believe in an easy life, did she?

'Come on, let's get out of here,' she said, and she and Poppy hurried off, leaving Dominic stunned on the thick pile carpet.

Rix was outside the mansion, leaning against a flyer.

‘Get ready to stun him,’ Benny muttered out of the side of her mouth as she and Poppy walked down the steps. ‘Then we take the car.’

But to her great surprise, the man sprang to attention as they approached. ‘Mr Troy, sir!’ he barked. ‘Do you wish to be transported anywhere, sir!’

‘Er...’ said Benny. ‘Anywhere?’

‘Anywhere you wish to go, sir! I will summon a chauffeur, sir!’

Well, this was certainly a change from last time...

‘Yes,’ said Benny. ‘Summon a chauffeur. We’d like to go to the shuttle port.’ She waited a moment. ‘No arrests? No telling us to stay on this planet? No “Mr Troy is under De Vallen jurisdiction”?’

‘No sir! I will summon a chauffeur, sir!’

‘Well, this is a bit of all right,’ said Benny, as they settled down into the comfy back seat of the limo, after Rix’s whistle had brought a blue-liveried man running. ‘Er... to the shuttle port, my man!’ she called, before putting up the screen between them. It looked like getting back to Brax was going to be a heck of a lot easier than she’d thought. She’d have to find a way of ditching Poppy, of course, but just for the moment Benny was going to enjoy the ride.

She leaned out of the open window to take a final look at the mansion. Because she was certainly never going to go back there again.

A short middle-aged man in royal blue was charging down the steps towards them. Benny gulped. It was the Dominic-guard!

She looked for, and found, a speaking tube. ‘Let’s get going!’ she called to the chauffeur, trying to keep the urgency out of her voice.

Dominic was nearly at the car. Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

‘That guard’s going to stop us!’ Poppy shrieked. ‘It’s the one we knocked out!’

‘Come on, come on,’ Benny muttered, as the flyer began to hum to life.

Dominic was only a few feet away. Benny hastily found the window control to create a barrier between them. She could still see Dominic through the one-way glass, though...

But he had stopped. Benny knew he couldn’t see her through the silvered glass, so why was he staring ahead with such a look on his face? Dominic reached out as if to touch the window, check it was really there. Benny instinctively raised her hand, too.

And seeing the smooth white skin with its perfectly manicured nails next to the calloused, weathered hand with its huge knuckles and black hairs, Benny realised exactly why Dominic had frozen. She almost felt sorry for him; the man whose greatest friend, the mirror,

had now become his worst enemy.

Almost felt sorry for him. But not quite.

The flyer began to move forward. 'And don't spare the horses!' Benny called down the speaking tube. Admittedly, she then had to spend the next five minutes explaining what a horse was and what relevance it had to motorised transport, but while she was doing so the chauffeur obligingly increased their speed, so it was worth it. As they sped off, Benny turned from her description of a coach-and-six to watch Dominic, still standing still as a statue – and then he sprang back into life as more guards began to pour down the mansion steps, and Benny thought she could hear shouts to the flyer, telling them to stop. She crossed her fingers – but the chauffeur didn't seem to have heard, and then they turned a corner and the mansion was gone.

Benny had gone through everything from Eohippus to pure blood Arabs, Karl Benz to the Ormand-Seltec flyer, taking in highwaymen, myths about horseshoes, and the irrelevance of horseradish and horse chestnuts on the way. Poppy had been looking on in amazement, and Benny guessed she was acting fairly out of character for Dominic. But just for the moment she didn't care. It had been a long time since she'd given a lecture, and she'd forgotten how inspiring it felt to impart knowledge.

It gave her a warm glowy feeling, and she suddenly realised that in her efforts to pretend to be someone else, she'd subconsciously been terrified that, without her body, she couldn't be Benny anymore.

But now she knew she could.

The chauffeur didn't seem to have taken much intellectual stimulation from her extremely interesting talk, though. 'You don't 'alf know a lot,' he said. 'Still, you won't be needing that anymore, what with you going to own all of Mr De Vallen's estate when he pops off.'

Benny was silent for a second. Oh my gosh. That would certainly explain a lot...

And Poppy was grabbing Benny's arm tightly. She seemed slightly excited. Carefully, Benny switched off the speaking tube and sat back.

Poppy had almost danced herself off the seat with glee. 'Did you hear that?' she cried. 'We're going to own all of De Vallen's estate! He's leaving it to us!'

'To Dominic,' said Benny, thinking aloud.

Poppy stiffened. 'Same thing, hon. What's mine is yours, what's yours is mine.'

'Er, yes,' Benny agreed. 'I know that. Sorry.'

'And that explains why everyone was calling you sir, and letting us through!'

'Yup, sure does,' said Benny.

'Well, turn the flyer round! Get him to take us back!'

‘Why?’

‘Because there’s a beautiful estate waiting for us! We’ve got to thank Mr De Vallen for a start.’

‘Ah.’ Benny thought quickly. ‘I don’t think that would be very tactful, do you? It’d look like we were hanging around, waiting for him to die.’

‘Hon, if he’s even told the chauffeur what’s going on, he can’t be that sensitive about it, can he?’

‘I still think it’d be better if we left him in peace for a bit. Went off-world.’

Poppy’s voice was getting higher. ‘You have to be joking! That just does not make sense, hon. We agreed off-planet stuff had to be kept to a minimum. And now, when there’s so much to lose...’

‘Why?’ demanded Benny. ‘Why did we agree off-planet stuff had to be kept to a minimum? I don’t remember agreeing that,’ she concluded, with absolute honesty.

‘Well, because you’re a war criminal, duh!’ said Poppy.

Oh gosh. Of course, Benny had sort of known that, but...

‘There’s no evidence against me, is there, though?’ Benny said, because if she ever got out of this she was going to have the kidnapping, murdering, incredibly handsome git for something. ‘I mean... I was just there. No proof.’ So give me proof!

‘I know. No proof.’ Buggeration. ‘But it’s still better to stay out of the way.’

‘No one knows my face!’ Benny said, remembering that.

‘You know, the whole “no photos” thing. So what does it matter?’

‘Oh yeah, and suppose you bump into one of those turncoats who sold the Axis out for their miserable lives? Kirit Jolm, or Teg Disoccin, for example. They know exactly who you are.’

‘Hmm, good point,’ said Benny, making a careful mental note of the names (too, too easy!). ‘But even if they recognised me... there’s no proof. You said so yourself.’

‘Babes, where are your brains this morning?’ (I think they’re functioning pretty well, actually, thought Benny. Do continue with the information.) The goody-goody galaxy doesn’t have any evidence against you, but you think that Kolonel Farning, or Commander Hepatra would rest for a second if they knew you were around? The first whisper gets out that Dominic Troy is Nico Lyence, and you’ve got ninety per cent of the upper echelons of the Fifth Axis on your tail trying to make sure you never get the chance to spill the beans.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Benny, noting those names as well. ‘I didn’t think of that. Hmm.’

‘So we go back to the estate, yeah?’

Benny shook her head. ‘I can’t do that, hon. I have to go back to the

Braxiatel Collection.'

The girl looked at her in disbelief. 'Don't mess with me, babes. This is everything we've ever wanted! You *can't* risk it!'

It was still a very good point, and Benny had no convincing answer. Why exactly would Dominic go chasing off to a nearby asteroid when he'd practically been given a planet on a plate and had so much to lose... But she *had* to go back to Brax somehow, she couldn't get sidetracked again... 'Er... I left something there. Got to go back and fetch it.' Oh Goddess, Bernice, you can do better than that!

'Like what? Whatever it is, you can buy another one now! We've got millions coming to us!'

Benny strained for a reply again. 'Because... it was something personal. Irreplaceable. You know, one of my... important personal irreplaceable things. One of those.'

'This is so bollocks!' Poppy cried. 'All our work – *all* of it – and you're turning your back on it!'

'Tell you what,' said Benny, suddenly spotting a way to get rid of her unwanted companion, 'you go back. We'll get the chauffeur to drop me off at the shuttle port, and then whizz you straight back to the mansion. You can... I don't know...'

(think what might sound convincing...) '...start planning a new colour scheme or something. Make it nice for when I get back.'

'You have got to be kidding.'

'Actually, no.' Benny was getting fed up with this. Because she'd just that second decided that actually she really didn't have to pretend to be someone else any more, because she had the crystal, she was on her way to the shuttle port, everyone on this planet now thought she was a VIP, and she was not going to jeopardise her chance of getting back to Brax and her own body, just to keep a war criminal's girlfriend sweet. 'Driver?' She picked up the speaking tube again and called down it. 'Driver, could you stop here a moment? Ms Prince is just getting out.'

'I am not!'

'Yes, you are,' said Benny, grabbing hold of the irritating girl as the flyer ground to a halt. 'You can hitch a ride back. I'm going to the shuttle port, and I can do without your whinging.'

She opened the flyer door. 'Out! Go on, get out!'

But – stupid, stupid, stupid – she'd forgotten that Poppy still had a stun gun.

When Benny came round, they were travelling back the way they'd come. She could tell because she was facing one of the one-way flyer windows, though she couldn't move her head yet. Which meant she also couldn't block her ears to Poppy's ranting.

‘I know why you want to go back to the stupid Braxiatel Collection, hon, don’t think you’ve fooled me. You’ve been acting weird ever since you came back from there. I thought you were just going to seduce that middle-aged cow to get information out of her, and you know I don’t mind that. We’ve been together for long enough now; I can cope with your work. But she’s done something to you. I don’t want to believe that you can have fallen for some flat-chested pseudo-intellectual bitch, but I guess you must’ve done. ‘Cos there ain’t no other reason why you’d be acting like this to me.

You’ve never turned me down before, and I just don’t like it.

And now we’ve been offered everything we’ve always wanted – a mansion, and servants, and so much cash that you’ll never have to take another job and risk damaging yourself again. And we can live in the manner to which you’ve become accustomed, because I know how important that is to you.

Which is why I know that you wouldn’t be trying to get off-planet again unless it was the biggest deal in the universe. So I guess you must’ve fallen for Stupid Summerfield, because I can’t think of another reason that you’d risk all this. And I can’t let you do it. We’re soul mates, Dommy,’ the girl was almost crying now, ‘soul mates unto death. You know that. You couldn’t think for a second that I’d let you go to another woman. I’d kill you first. So you’ve got two choices. You come back to De Vallen’s place with me, or you die. That’s it: no other options. What’s it to be?’

Well, Benny could hardly answer her just at the moment. She hoped that Poppy would realise that, and not kill her before the stun wore off. But really... jealous females. She couldn’t be having with that. And ‘soul mates’ indeed! What rubbish.

Catch Benny ever suspecting a man of cheating on her if he so much looked at another woman. Not the sort of thing she’d do at all. And if she was deliberately not thinking of specific examples that contradicted that, her mind might believe she was telling the truth.

Was it really possible to have a ‘soul mate’? Did she have one? Was that why she couldn’t get ex-hubby Jason out of her head, even though he was the most ex-est of exes possible?

Were they fated to be together? And, if so, why did they row so much when they were together?

Soul mates should understand each other; be in perfect harmony. Not throw crockery at each other and then have week-long sulks.

Can’t live together, can’t live apart. That wasn’t the definition of soul mates, that was the definition of seriously incompatible people who just happened to be in love.

Gosh.

She’d just admitted to herself that she was still in love with her ex.

Oh, she knew she was obsessed with him, she'd thought about that long and hard. But actually in love... Talk about a day for self-discovery. Just a shame that she was never likely to see him again. And that she was about to be murdered by a woman scorned anyway.

She managed to raise one hand slightly. Poppy was looking out of the window; if Benny could recover without her noticing she might be able to disarm her...

But what was Poppy looking at? That flyer's hailing us,' she was saying. 'It looks like that guard from the mansion; the one we knocked out. We shouldn't have any problems in dealing with him now, not if you're De Vallen's heir. I'll get out and stall him until you come round. But –' and here she shot Benny a scarily meaningful look – 'don't you forget what I was saying.'

Benny was panicking. It was Dominic! And here she was with the crystal and completely unable to defend herself! Oh help...

She could hear voices outside the flyer.

'Poppy, it's me!'

'What the heck are you talking about?'

'Babes, it's me, Dominic.'

'Are you a complete loony?'

'I know it's hard to believe. But it's all to do with that crystal. Look –'

'Don't come any closer. I'm armed. I said, don't come any closer!'

There was the sound of a scuffle. Benny sincerely hoped Poppy had shot him. But no such luck. A metallic thud sounded rather like a stun gun hitting the ground.

'I'm telling the truth, hon. That's not me in that car. That's Bernice Summerfield in my body. Have you got the crystal?'

'So that's what this is all about. You want the crystal back. Pretty elaborate story, loser.'

'Which should prove that I'm telling the truth. Wouldn't I come up with something more plausible?'

'Ever heard of the double bluff?'

'Just show me the crystal. That's all I'm asking.'

Benny's hand was severely tingling now. She was able to move it even more. She reached into the pocket holding the crystal. If she could hold on to it tightly, it might at least make it the tiniest bit more difficult for them to get it off her. Delay the inevitable for just a few moments.

She felt something cool and smooth, and gripped it hard.

But it wasn't the crystal, it was the small bottle of stain remover she'd taken from Dominic's bathroom. Carefully, very, very carefully, she pulled it from her pocket. Slowly, she raised her other hand, trying desperately to ignore the painful pins and needles of every

movement. And in fits and starts, she unscrewed the bottle lid.

The flyer door slammed open. 'Is this guy telling the truth?'

Poppy yelled. 'He knows everything about us!'

'Just get the crystal and I'll prove it to you!' Benny was able to turn her head enough to see Dominic the guard standing in the doorway, yelling at them, Poppy's stun gun in hand.

'On't... ooove...' Benny hissed from between unmoving lips.

Dominic raised the gun.

'No!' screeched Benny as loudly as she could. 'Thish gottle is ull og ashid.'

'So?' said Poppy. 'If he stuns you, baby, you can't throw it.'

'Not oger you,' said Benny, 'Oger thish goddy. He shoots ee – I dop it.'

Dominic gasped. 'You utter, utter cow.'

'That'sh ee!'

Poppy turned to him. 'Dom? Shoot him. Her. Whatever.'

'No. I can't risk it. Acid on my hands...' he shivered.

'Yeah. Listen to the man,' said Benny, her face becoming more mobile. 'I can cope with the pain, you know. And it's not as if I'm planning to keep this body long term.' She managed to lean forward far enough to reach the speaker tube. The driver seemed to be watching all that was going on with interest, but turned back hastily when she addressed him. 'Turn round, we're going back to the shuttle port.' She pulled the door closed, not taking her eyes off Guard-Dominic or Poppy for a moment. The bottle was still gripped tightly in one hand.

As soon as the door was shut, the flyer took off again. And Benny breathed the most enormous sigh of relief. Because when it came right down to it, she wasn't entirely sure whether pouring stain remover on her hand – irritant though it might be – would have achieved quite the dramatic effect she was after.

* * *

Chevy and Rix got out of the flyer, and walked *over* to Poppy and Dominic. 'What the hell's he rushed off for? Too overcome by the news?'

'Ah,' said Dominic. 'I didn't get a chance to tell him.'

'Tell him what?' asked Poppy.

Dominic half-smiled. 'The reason we were pursuing you. To let you know that De Vallen was found dead a short time ago. To let you know that Dominic Troy now owns half this planet.'

Poppy and Dominic were staring deep into each other's eyes.

'He must have thought you wanted to arrest him,' she said.

'Didn't understand.' She took a deep breath. 'He's heading for the

shuttle port. Some crazy idea about catching a shuttle to the Braxiatel Collection.'

'Then we must follow him,' said Dominic. 'He mustn't get offworld... without hearing the news.'

The four of them climbed into the flyer.

In Which Bernice Steals a Spaceship

Benny knew she wouldn't have much time when they got to the port. The flyer carrying Dominic and Poppy – and a couple more figures, from the glances she'd caught – was still on her tail. Her chauffeur, slightly confused but obviously game for a laugh, had been trying to lose them, but as they knew where she was going anyway that wasn't going to do a lot of good in the end. Benny briefly considered not making for the spaceport and hiding out somewhere on Hera for a while, until she could get a (convincing) message to Brax – but she had a horrible feeling that experienced mercenaries like Dominic and Poppy would be able to track her down, and might be able to cut her exit off anyway. The best thing to do would be to get to the port before them, and just get on a Brax shuttle ASAP.

She really wished she had somewhere to hide the crystal, just in case, but she didn't dare risk leaving it anywhere, and she had no other options. She buried it right at the bottom of an inside pocket, and would just have to hope for the best.

They were coming up to the shuttle port now. Benny hadn't seen Dominic's flyer behind them for a bit, and was seriously hoping she'd gained the time she needed. The second they were at the gate, she jumped for the door and ran for it. She didn't even take the time to thank the chauffeur. Well, it wasn't her he'd be thinking of as an ungrateful wretch, it'd be Dominic.

The next flight to the Braxiatel Collection departed in fifteen minutes. All she had to do was keep out of sight until then. But there were one or two things she wanted to do first... Ah – there was just the thing she was looking for...

'Don't touch me!'

A hiss in return. 'Poppy!'

She untensed, leaned back towards him. 'Sorry, babes,' she whispered. 'Instinctive. You know I can't bear anyone but you touching me,' she smiled for a moment. 'I thought you'd gone off me. I didn't know how I was going to live with that. Still can't get the hang of you being...' she turned her head to give him a once-over, '...ugly.' She shivered.

'And how the hell do you think I feel?'

'You're... you're the same person inside, hon,' she said, reaching out

a hand to Jay on his knee. It wasn't hard to notice that the hand was quivering slightly, not confident in its touch.

Not wanting to be there.

'What does that matter?' Dominic scowled at her. 'Even you don't want to be near me like this.'

'Dommy...'

'Even I don't want to be near me like this!' He shook off her hand, and was silent for a moment. Then he whispered, 'How can they bear it? How can people bear it if they're not beautiful? How do they cope?'

From the front of the flyer came the bleeping of a personal communicator. Poppy and Dominic both heard Chevy go 'yes?'. Then a few moments later, in a hard voice, he said 'I see. Well, it seems there's one very obvious suspect, doesn't there. Thank you for letting me know.'

Poppy and Dominic exchanged worried glances.

Ten minutes till the shuttle launched.

Yes! – there was a communications terminal! Just time to get a message through to Brax. She hurried over to it, and opened a link. 'Come on, come on,' she hissed, waiting for it to come on line.

'Put down the phone and put your arms up,' it replied.

What?

But the voice didn't come from the comms unit. It came from directly behind her, and it sounded just like Chevy the guard.

Benny reluctantly terminated the connection, and raised her hands in the air. 'Get the crystal,' said another voice –

Dominic's.

'Hang on a minute,' Benny protested. 'Don't you lay a finger on me! I'm going to be your boss some day, remember!'

'You would have been,' said Chevy's voice, 'if you hadn't poisoned Mr De Vallen. We've just had word through from his personal physician that his death was not a natural one. A phial that had contained poison was found near his body. And a valuable crystal is missing.'

'But that's rubbish!' said Benny, acutely conscious of the crystal in her inside pocket. 'Why would I kill him?'

Chevy laughed. 'It seems fairly obvious. This morning Mr De Vallen announces that you're to inherit everything when he dies. Then he dies.'

'Oh come on!' Benny said. 'There are so many holes in that you could use it as a colander. If I poisoned Mr De Vallen to inherit his estate, why would I do a runner? Why wouldn't I destroy the evidence? Why should I steal the crystal if I was going to get it all

anyway? Why would I kill him on the very day suspicion against me would be greatest?

‘I don’t know,’ said Chevy. ‘Perhaps you’re not as clever as you like to think you are. You see, we know you did it. Bill here – one of Mr De Vallen’s most trusted staff – saw you. He didn’t realise its significance until we heard the news, but he’s very definite about it. Ah,’ he continued, as Benny squeaked in protest, ‘you didn’t realise there’d been any witnesses, did you? But you must have got a shock when we stopped you earlier. No wonder you wanted to get away so quick with the loot. But you’re coming back with us to stand trial.’

Oooh, clever, thought Benny, trying to think of a defence, as Chevy began to pat her down. He reached the crystal almost immediately, and removed it. Damn. If only she’d been able to hide it.

‘I think that’s all the evidence we need,’ Chevy said.

‘Well, seeing as you’ve got the crystal, can I put my hands down now?’ she asked. They let her, on condition that she make no sudden moves. ‘Now can I speak to you alone, “Bill”,’ she said, turning slowly to face them all. ‘I have to convince you of my innocence.’

‘Bill’ frowned at her. He was holding the crystal.

‘It’s to our mutual advantage,’ she insisted.

He nodded. ‘All right. But make it quick.’

‘Bill, mate? Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ That was Rix.

‘I’ll be fine,’ said Dominic. ‘In the interests of fairness, I should hear what he has to say. I may have been mistaken.’ He looked at Benny. ‘I doubt it, though.’

She frowned at him as they moved off together.

‘I think I win this round, Benny,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve got the crystal back, and now you’re going to give me my body. If you’re particularly co-operative, I might let you take this revolting piece of flesh –’ he shuddered, gesturing at ‘Bill’s’ body – ‘as long as you promise never to come near me again.’

‘All right,’ said Benny.

Dominic looked slightly taken aback. ‘You’re giving in? Without a fight?’

‘Absolutely.’ Benny smiled at him. ‘As you say, you have all the cards. We’ll swap bodies back right away.’

He held up the crystal. ‘Good. I’m glad you’re seeing sense.’

‘...and then you can be the one arrested and put on trial for murder,’ Benny concluded.

Dominic’s hand froze. ‘You bitch!’

‘It was a very clever plan. Tied up all the loose ends. Got the guards on your side. I suppose you killed De Vallen?’

‘I’ve never killed anyone in my life,’ he said. ‘I don’t like getting my hands dirty. De Vallen killed himself. Except he was expecting to be in

a position where he'd be able to tidy up all the details afterwards. I just used the situation to my advantage. I had to think fast, you know.'

'Ah,' said Benny. 'Bummer for you. But here's my solution. You tell the terrible twosome that you were mistaken. Dominic Troy didn't kill De Vallen, and is perfectly at liberty to leave the planet. We both go back to the Braxiatel Collection.'

'And Poppy?'

'If you like. Then both of you will help me to convince Braxiatel who I really am, and we'll find Avril. Then – and only then – will we all swap bodies, under Irving Braxiatel's watchful eye. Then you can come back here and claim De Vallen's fortune.' She deliberately failed to mention that actually she was intending to have Dominic arrested and handed over to the war crimes commission, where the few names she'd found out would probably persuade him to tell it everything he knew.

She thought that might put him off. 'And just remember, if you're tempted to jump me at any point, that I still have that bottle of acid, and various other things, and I can cope with a bit of pain. Whereas you, I've found out, can't cope with a single scratch on your flawless skin. Now, is it a deal?'

Dominic narrowed his eyes, looking distinctly unhappy with the turned tables. But he agreed. Together, they went over to Chevy, Rix and Poppy.

'I've just been telling them how I saw everything too,' Poppy said. 'Backing up your story, Bill. How I was innocently caught up in the whole thing.'

'Ah,' said Benny. 'Oh dear.'

'I suppose you must have been mistaken too, young lady,' said Dominic, flashing her some serious looks. 'Because I've just been speaking with Mr Troy here, and it turns out he has a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything. And I mean, everything. So much so, that I've said we'll both accompany him off-planet. For protection.'

'You are joking?' Poppy screeched.

'No,' Dominic assured her, 'I'm not.' He turned to Chevy and Rix. 'I'm very sorry to have troubled you, guys. You can be getting back to the mansion now. Help prepare it for its new owner, you know.'

Reluctantly, it seemed, they agreed, and moved away.

'Now we've only got five minutes to make it to the shuttle!' said Benny, ignoring Poppy's demands for explanations. 'Come on!'

She raced off to the bay where she'd last caught sight of her own body, as Avril jetted off to the Braxiatel Collection; the other two ran after her.

There was a ship in the bay. But it wasn't one of the tasteful, lemon-

coloured shuttles that served the Braxiatel Collection; it was a bright orange craft bearing the logo of Frogfish Spacelines, the bargain fleet from the nearby planet Hephaestus VI. Tourists of all shapes, sizes, colours and odours were streaming down its ramp, chattering excitedly, wreaths of Awablooms hung around their necks and cuddly rainbow-coloured frogfish grasped in their arms.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Benny, staring at it in concern. ‘We can’t have missed it.’ Several of the passing tourists were trying to take photos of her, and she shooed them away.

‘Well, was it definitely going from this bay?’ Poppy asked.

Benny frowned. ‘I thought all Brax flights went from this bay,’ she said.

Poppy gave her a look that indicated she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘You didn’t *check*?!’

‘I was in a bit of a hurry!’ Benny said, defensively. ‘The only two flights I’ve seen both came from here, so it was a fairly safe assumption—hang on, I’m not arguing about this now. We’ve got less than three minutes to find the right bay!’

Dominic smiled smugly. ‘Just leave it to me.’ He walked over to an orange-clad female shuttle guard. ‘Hello,’ he smiled, obviously waiting for her to swoon.

‘Yes?’ she said, disinterestedly.

‘I wondered if you could help me.’

She sighed. ‘That’s what I’m here for. What can I do for you?’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘What *can’t* you do for me.’

The woman sighed again. ‘Do you have a serious question?

I have duties to attend to.’ She began to turn away.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to face him. ‘Yes, I have a question, babe. I don’t get your attitude. What’s wrong with you?’

‘What’s wrong with me?’ she shrieked, jerking her arm away,

‘what’s wrong with you, more like! Hey! Jonno!’

A burly bloke in a Frogfish T-shirt approached them. ‘Got a problem, Teen?’

‘Yes,’ the woman said, staring at Dominic.

‘No,’ said Dominic. ‘I was just going.’

He went back to Poppy and Bernice. ‘She wasn’t much help,’

Poppy said.

‘Stupid cow,’ he grunted in the guard’s rough voice. ‘Bloody unnatural woman.’

‘Oh, did your famous charm not work?’ said Bernice, giving him big innocent eyes. ‘I wonder why? Could it be because your appeal lays entirely in your looks and not at all in your non-existent personality?’

‘Really?’ he replied. ‘When you were hanging on my every word back on the Braxiatel Collection I never dreamed you were so

shallow.'

Bernice frowned at him. 'Yeah yeah, you've made your point. I'm a sucker for a pretty face. It's not like we were on track for a long-term relationship.'

'You bet we weren't. I wouldn't have been seen dead with a middle-aged flat-chested bitch like you if I hadn't had something pretty big to gain.'

'Well, you obviously needed to gain "something pretty big",' said Benny. 'Everything closer to home being fairly minute, I'm sorry to say.' Raising her eyes to the sky, she casually pointed some fingers in a general groinal direction.

Dominic glowered and raised a fist.

'Oh yes, go on, hit a poor defenceless woman,' said Benny, six-foot plus of hulking male muscle. 'Go on, punch me – bruise me, scratch me, damage my delicate skin.'

Dominic pulled back.

'We now have one minute to find the right shuttle,' said Benny, secretly rather pleased with the effect of her remarks on Dominic. It really was the case that to kick a man where it hurt, you just had to insult the place that was the one that you would kick to hurt him, and he was hurt just the same without you having to go to all the bother of actually doing the kicking.

A formidable weapon indeed. Because – and this was the amazing part – surely Dominic must have *known* that she was just winding him up, he couldn't *really* have size issues, could he? Were men really that insecure? Or was it just the male equivalent of those pencil-thin stick-insect model-type women who kept saying things like 'oh no, I'm so fat', or 'I could never bring myself to wear shorts like you do in public, you're so brave', and totally wound Benny up.

They had started jogging back into the terminal and were now sprinting. Benny suddenly caught a glimpse of pale-yellow. 'This way!' she yelled, amazed that she wasn't even slightly out of breath, and sped ahead of the others.

At the shuttle, a young steward was just coming down the ramp. Benny jumped up on it and tried to run past him – but he put an arm out to stop her.

'I'm sorry – this flight has been cancelled.'

'What? It can't be! Do you know how fast we had to run to make this? We have to leave now!'

'I'm very sorry. There will be another flight in twelve hours.'

'*Twelve hours?!'* Dominic and Poppy had caught up with her now, and they were staring at the flight attendant in disbelief.

'No passengers are due to travel on this flight, so it has been cancelled.'

‘But we’re here now!’ said Benny, desperately. ‘Un-cancel it!’

The steward looked worried. ‘I’m very sorry, sir, but only authorised passengers are allowed on flights to the Braxiatel Collection. It’s a restricted planetoid. Could I see your security clearance? Perhaps there’s been some mistake.’

‘I’m Dominic Troy!’ shouted Benny. ‘De Vallen’s heir! I thought my word was supposed to be law, or something!’

‘I can’t let you on without security clearance,’ the man mumbled nervously.

‘I’ll show you our security clearance,’ growled Dominic, pulling the stun gun. ‘Now let us on.’

Suddenly the steward seemed to pull himself together. He threw his hands up in the air. ‘I give up. First that woman, now this. I am just not cut out for this job.’

He took off his lemon sash and handed it to Benny. ‘There. I have just resigned. You go ahead and board the restricted flight. I am going to become a hermit, or least find some form of employment that doesn’t involve dealing with the general public.’ And with that, he swept past them down the ramp. As Benny, Poppy and Dominic entered the shuttle, Benny heard him say, ‘Why should I put my life on the line? It’s not as if they’ll be going anywhere. There’s no pilot.’

‘That was nice and easy,’ Dominic smiled.

‘Did you not hear him?’ Benny demanded. ‘We’re on a shuttle with no pilot. And there’s no telling if your goons are going to change their minds and try to arrest me any minute!’

‘Then I’ll fly it,’ said Dominic. ‘Come on.’

Several minutes later, Benny was raising her eyes heavenwards as the shuttle lurched to the other side of the port and then settled back on the ground again. ‘I thought you said you could fly this thing!’

‘I can,’ Dominic replied, evenly. ‘It’s just this ridiculous body has no co-ordination. If I had my own body back...’

The radio suddenly crackled into life. ‘This is port security. Please leave the shuttle immediately.’

‘No way,’ said Benny. ‘To both things. We are going to the Braxiatel Collection and nothing is going to stop me. Get out of the way.’ The last was to Dominic, as she shoved him out of the pilot’s seat and eyed the controls. ‘Tell me how to fly this thing, or say toodle-oo to Mr Perfect Skin.’

And with Dominic reluctantly growling instructions, they finally took off.

‘Mr Braxiatel! Mr Braxiatel!’

Irving shivered slightly, and pretended not to hear. It sounded horribly as if Ms Jones was annoyed with him, and he quickened his

pace.

It didn't work. He could hear the 'click click' of her heels as she hurried after him.

'Mr Braxiatel! I have to speak to you *at once!*'

Reluctantly, Irving stopped and turned to greet her. 'Ms Jones! What a surprise.'

She sniffed. 'I have only just heard that you had returned to the Collection. You seem to have overlooked signing in at reception.'

'Well, it is my planet...' Brax began, but Ms Jones wasn't listening.

'I know you're fully aware of how important security is, so I will assume you must have something on your mind. Professor Summerfield, perhaps?'

Irving frowned. 'Benny? No. Unless you count this strange change in attitude from Adrian Wall...'

'Wall? What does he have to do with it?' Ms Jones sniffed. 'I am sorry to have to be the one to tell you, Mr Braxiatel, but I am afraid Professor Summerfield's recent behaviour falls well below the standard one expects from your staff.'

Irving tried to get another word in. 'Benny's more of a guest, really...'

Ms Jones sniffed even harder. 'Even worse! To abuse your hospitality like this! Quite frankly, I feel you should reconsider her position here on the Collection *immediately.*'

'But what is she supposed to have done?' Irving asked.

And Ms Jones began to tell him. It took quite a long time...

Chevy's personal communicator beeped at him again. He answered the call, and talked to the person on the other end for a few minutes.

'That sounded serious,' said Rix, sitting beside him in the driver's seat.

'It was,' Chevy told him. 'Turn around, we're going back to the shuttle port. They've found fingerprints on the poison container.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Bill's.'

'But Bill would never -'

'That's what I'd have said. But it seems pretty clear. They must all be in it together. And we're gonna make sure they don't get away with it.'

Escape to Danger

Benny was finding it hard to concentrate on controlling the space craft. Its auto pilot had cut in as soon as they'd got into Hera's orbit, but she still had to keep an eye on things.

It had seemed fair enough that Dominic brought Poppy with him – what was the harm in that? The harm in that, she was now realising, was that she was outnumbered two to one. She still had the little bottle of 'acid', and she was bigger than them, yes, but she was trying to make sure they made it to the Braxiatel Collection on top of everything else, and she couldn't look in four directions at once. Dominic had the crystal, and were they to jump her... well, bye, bye, Benny.

Time to deploy her last card.

'I've been looking through the specifications,' she called across to her unwanted partners-in-crime, 'and there are safes for passenger valuables in the luggage hold – which is right at the back, but we can get to it from here. The passenger is registered, and then the security locks can only be opened by both the passenger and a designated crewman. Which means that we can lock up the crystal, and neither of us can get at it without the other.'

'I don't think so,' said Poppy, sneering. 'I think things are perfectly balanced as they are. You're threatening Dommy, but we've got the crystal.'

'True,' agreed Benny. 'And I'm sure it hadn't even crossed your mind to jump me when I was concentrating on something else, use the crystal to get "Dommy" his precious body back, and fly off into the great unknown. Because I know you're both such honourable people. But, my way, we all have to stick together.'

'And you're going to threaten Dommy with acid unless we do,' Poppy concluded. 'You're worse than us.'

'Mmm,' said Benny. 'I won't get in to an ethical discussion with a couple of war criminal mercenaries just now, if you don't mind. I have so many better thing to do with my time. And you're wrong, I'm not going to keep threatening darling Dominic with acid.'

He made a move towards her. She raised a hand to stop him.

'Hear me out. I can cope with pain, but I'd infinitely prefer not to have to. And the acid plan does mean I have to stay on my guard the whole time. So, back at the shuttle port, I came up with another plan. Here.' She pulled a small, stiff piece of paper from her pocket, and handed it to Dominic, who looked at it aghast. 'I took these at one of

those handy booths. Oh, don't worry, I said "cheese" for you,' Benny reassured him.

Dominic stared down at the sheet of holo-prints in dismay.

'How...?' he asked.

'How did I take your photo? Easy-peasy lemon squeezy, once I'd worked out that you must be carrying a disruption field of some sort, and narrowed it down to your pendant.' She leaned across and helpfully pointed at the prints. 'You're not wearing it in these, you see. Oh, and you might want to see what I've written on the back.'

Glaring, Dominic turned the sheet over. On the back was written: 'Dominic Troy, alias Nico Lyence, the Gigolo of the Fifth Axis. Identity can be confirmed by Kirit Jom or Teg Disocin. Lyence is able to give evidence against Kolonel Farning and Commander Hepatra of the Fifth Axis.'

Wordlessly, he began to tear the photos into tiny pieces.

'Oh no!' said Benny. 'I never thought of that! How can I have been so stupid as to let you destroy my only set of holoprints!'

She pretended to think for a moment. 'Of course! Silly me!

They're *not* my only set of prints. The others have been sent to an investigative journalist friend of mine on Pakhar, with instructions to pass the information on to the authorities unless she receives a specific code from me within a specified period of time. I'm *not* stupid, you know,' she said, as Dominic looked up at her, 'She knows my handwriting, and she's extremely trustworthy. And believe me, I've covered all the bases. I'm not running the risk of being arrested in your place.'

Dominic appeared to have trouble holding himself back.

'It could have been worse!' Benny assured him. 'I was thinking about contacting *Playbeing* and offering to do a photoshoot for them. Shall we go and find this safe, now?'

Benny was still in quite a chatty mood when they returned to the flight deck and she took her place behind the controls. 'You know, your body reacts when I see someone I find attractive. It's absolutely fascinating. And what's really, really interesting, is that I obviously don't find your new body attractive in the slightest. Not even a twinge. Not the faintest hint of stiffening. That body just leaves me cold. Cold and floppy, I should say. Wouldn't it be terrible if something went wrong and you had to stay in it for ever?'

Dominic didn't say a word. Benny noticed his fists were clenched very tightly.

'Be careful,' she called to him, 'you don't want to bruise your palms. Oh, what am I saying, that doesn't matter any more, does it? You'd never be able to make a dent in all that rough skin, anyway.'

Dominic abruptly jumped to his feet, and left the flight deck.

Poppy followed him.

'Don't forget to pick up your complimentary bag of peanuts,' Benny called after them.

Just a few hours, and she'd be back at the Braxiatel Collection. Brax would believe her. She'd get her own body back.

In the tension, and the relief, and the smugness of having outmanoeuvred Dominic, Benny had completely forgotten that they'd stolen the space shuttle. So it was a bit of a shock when she noticed the pursuit ships on the screen.

Irving Braxiatel was sitting on Benny's bed, stroking Wolsey.

The tabby cat had been padding a ball from one paw to another when Brax arrived, and it had taken him a few moments to work out that the ball was actually Joseph, Benny's porter, inactive. Brax had made a note to have the sphere repaired, and wondered why Benny hadn't reported the fault herself. Now Wolsey was mewling loudly, giving the impression of having had no fuss, attention or food for some time – but this was not an uncommon impression for Wolsey to give, and Irving knew it was not usually true.

Although the bed – and the room – and the entire apartment – did, strictly speaking, belong to Irving, he was highly conscious of the privacy of his guests and normally would not have dreamed of entering Bernice's rooms without her permission. He also was not easily offended, and broadminded enough to tolerate a wide spectrum of behaviour. But he knew what Benny was like, and if what Ms Jones's had described was the truth, then there was something seriously wrong. If he had to violate social codes to find out what it was, then so be it.

While he petted Wolsey, his eyes were sweeping the room, looking for clues – not the easiest of tasks, as it was in even more of a state than usual. Irving himself owned an exceptionally large amount of material possessions, including the planetoid and everything on it, but nevertheless managed to keep it all perfectly neat and tidy. Bernice had very few things, but nevertheless they took up all available space. In many ways, Irving was impressed.

His eye was caught by a child's picture book resting on top of a chest of drawers, and he abandoned Wolsey for a moment to fetch it. It was called 'The Adventure of the Crystal Cavern', and a stamp inside the front cover showed it came from the Collection's library. Also inside it was a long computer printout. Someone had annotated the text considerably, and he also noticed that one of Benny's trademark sticky notes had been affixed to the end. He sat down again on Benny's bed, and began to read it. When he finally put it down, an

observer would have been very surprised at his expression. He was looking first at the picture book, and then at the print-out; picture book, print-out; picture book, print-out. His face was puzzled. It seemed that, for once, Irving Braxiatel didn't know quite what to think.

* * *

Adrian Wall was in his workshop. He'd bartered the silver off a visitor, and the tiny gem had belonged to his mother. Adrian's hands might be big and someone who didn't know him well might assume someone of his size had to be clumsy, but he was a craftsman, and this was a true labour of love.

He'd never met anyone before who made him feel this way.

They were going to be in comms range with the Braxiatel Collection any moment now. Benny was so desperate for that, but scared too – it was a bit like waiting for exam results.

She'd managed to stay ahead of the pursuit craft. They'd been radioing the shuttle, telling them to surrender or face the consequences. After a while, the ones demanding their surrender in the matter of the stolen spaceship had been joined by another demanding their surrender in the matter of murder.

Benny had recognised Chevy's voice, but she wasn't going to give up. She had so far kept out of range of their weaponry, and she knew that if she could just talk to Irving Braxiatel he could get the whole thing sorted out. If, however, she ended up in a Heran prison, goodness knows what would happen.

Normally when she was locked up she at least had the hope that someone, somewhere, knowing she was missing, would be trying to find her. Now, no one would even know, because as far as they knew Professor Bernice Surprise Summerfield was safely on the Braxiatel Collection.

And if she was captured, she wouldn't be able to contact Keri the Pakhar and tell her to hold the story. So Benny would be arrested for war crimes too. She thought she'd covered all the bases, but she was just trying to stop Dominic hurting her. She hadn't counted on all of this.

She'd tuned the comms unit into the Braxiatel Collection frequency already. It was unfortunate that it wasn't a general unit able to phone out to anyone, but she was keeping her fingers crossed that she could get a message to Irving anyway.

The little red light at the top of the panel started to flicker. They were coming in range. Without waiting for the continuous light that would mean full contact, Benny began to transmit.

‘Hello, Braxiatel Collection. Braxiatel Collection, can you read me? This is shuttle...’ she looked around for some identification, ‘this is shuttle H7430.’

A buzz from the unit. ‘Br... ion here. Your signal is... ong... three-oh.’

‘Sorry, Braxiatel Collection,’ Benny continued. ‘No time to waste. Please listen very carefully. I have an urgent message for Irving Braxiatel. Our ship is being pursued by police ships from the planet Hera. Braxiatel must give us safe passage to land. Please tell Braxiatel that it is the express wish of Professor Bernice Summerfield, and is a matter of life and death.’

‘Didn’t get all of that, H7430. Please repeat.’

The little red light was continuous now. Benny might as well have waited. But then she glanced up at the screen, and saw that the pursuit ships had gained some ground. She really did have no time to lose.

‘Braxiatel Collection, repeat, we need safe passage! It’s urgent!’

A crackle. ‘H7430, regret we have no jurisdiction outside Braxiatel Collection airspace. At your current speed, you will not enter this for another four point two seven minutes.’

Benny glanced at the screen again, and did some sums in her head. The police and Chevy would be within firing range before then. Oh Goddess. She opened the link again and began to shout at the operator.

‘I have to speak to Irving Braxiatel himself. Please, this is very, very important.’

‘Please wait, H7430.’

Benny waited, resisting the temptation to chew Dominic’s perfect nails. After a few seconds, the operator came back on line.

‘Regret, H7430, Irving Braxiatel is not responding. Am transferring you to Ms Jones.’

‘No, not Ms Jones!’ cried Benny, but the operator had already gone.

‘Why not Ms Jones?’ came a familiar, female, terrifying voice.

Benny yelled, and fell off her chair. Oh Goddess, the pursuit ships had begun firing! She heard distant cries from further inside the shuttle, and guessed that Dominic and Poppy had been thrown about a bit as well.

She dusted herself down and checked the dials in front of her. They’d only been grazed; the ships weren’t close enough yet to do serious damage. But it was only a matter of time. She swore, and hurried back to the comms unit. ‘Ms Jones, are you still there?’

‘Yes. I was led to understand that this was a matter of some urgency. However I will not tolerate abusive language, nor will I waste my valuable time being ignored.’

'I'm so sorry, Ms Jones,' Benny began placatingly, 'I didn't mean to ignore you. It's just that I'm being shot at.'

'Who is this? To whom am I speaking?'

Benny took a deep breath. 'You're going to find this very difficult to believe. But I assure you it's the truth and once I'm safe I'll explain everything, so please take it on trust for now. I'm B-mmmmph!'

'Hello?' said Ms Jones's voice through the comms link.

'Hello? Hello? Oh, this is ridiculous. Communication terminated.' Benny didn't hear any of it, though.

Benny began to regain consciousness under the distinct impression that she had somehow fallen asleep on the couch, pulled all the throws and cushions over her head, and the toast was burning. It took her about a minute to work out that this was not the case.

She was drowning in softness, and it was getting hard to breathe. After another minute she remembered being grabbed from behind on the flight deck. Quite what Dominic had expected to achieve by that she didn't know. And then she remembered the pursuit ships, and smelled the burning smell – more oil than toast – and realised that there was no sensation of movement at all and that the floor was sloping by about forty-five degrees.

She was trapped in a crashed space shuttle.

She forced herself to stay calm, not use up all the air. She tried moving, and she was able to, just, although she was packed in quite tightly with what felt like blankets and pillows.

If she could work out which was the way to the door... did linen closets have door handles on the inside? Let's hope so...

Slowly, very slowly, she burrowed downhill through the blankets until she felt a smooth surface. It was fairly cool, which was a good sign. But she was keenly aware that even if the smoke and flames weren't near her at the moment, the whole thing could explode at any second.

She felt her way to the far side of the smoothness. No break in it, which meant it was not the door. She inched her way round to the next wall, and here she was luckier. Her fingers discovered a definite edge. But she was stretched out to such an extent that she couldn't exert any pressure on it. She wriggled further forward, and the smell of smoke became stronger. She pulled up a corner of blanket to shield her face as much as possible. But now she was closer to the door she was able to push.

And it swung open.

Benny and a shower of pillows landed on the carpet of what she assumed must be the stewards' room. She grabbed a linen napkin from a pile, poured a complimentary bottle of pure spring water over it,

and tied it around her nose and mouth.

Keeping close to the floor, she crawled to a door on one side and pushed it open. Gravity snatched it from her hand, and the heat slammed into her face. She had to dart through the doorway to pull the door closed again, and got a mouthful of smoke even through the napkin. No way out in that direction.

She hurriedly piled up blankets to cover the crack under the door, and poured more bottles of spring water over them. She couldn't risk the smoke overcoming her. She forced herself up the floor to the only other door. There were no windows, she was obviously in the middle of the ship. If this way were impassable too, she was screwed.

Don't think of that.

She was getting carpet burns on the palms of her hands, and she almost laughed to think of what Dominic's reaction would be. Hah, it was his own stupid fault. What the hell had he been playing at? It wasn't as if he could get at the crystal without her. The crystal! She suddenly remembered the crystal, tucked inside its little safe at the back of the ship. The back of the ship that was now burning merrily away. She offered up a prayer: please get me out of this alive, and please may the crystal be okay. Please. Please, please, please.

She had to reach up to turn the handle of the other door.

This time, there was no smoke, no fierce heat, and she thanked any gods that were listening. So far, so good.

She had to go uphill now. She didn't know where she was going; she'd just have to keep moving as long as she could and hope she came to a door.

And, suddenly, she did.

She found herself just outside the flight deck, and there was an airlock door. She called 'Dominic! Poppy!' but there was no reply. Had to assume they were out, or toast. She could worry about that when she'd made it herself.

She staggered to her feet, and pulled the handle to release the inner airlock. Slowly it hissed open. She walked through, and shut it from behind. Then she pulled the handle which would open the outer door.

Nothing happened.

She didn't panic. She just took a few deep breaths, and tried again.

Still nothing.

And then she noticed that the tail of her shirt was caught in the inner door. She opened it, pulled the shirt tightly around herself, and shut the door hurriedly again. Smoke was already creeping up the corridor. At least she was safe from that in here.

She pulled the handle of the outer door again. This time, wonderfully, it hissed open. Benny hurried forward. And found that the ground was very, very far away.

Jump, Benny, Jump!

Benny had been staring down for what felt like minutes, mesmerised. She was dimly aware of figures down there, little ant people whose voices were being carried to her on the wind. Both Dominic and Poppy were there, and it looked like half of Brax's security staff were surrounding them. Dominic appeared to be struggling, trying to get away.

Suddenly someone noticed her. She could hear the cries of people telling other people to look up, see the person up there so high. A couple of ant men ran off. Benny hoped they'd gone to get a ladder. Not that there was a ladder long enough anywhere in the world.

Then a beautiful sight. A bright yellow construction vehicle was trundling towards her, bucket swinging on top. It stopped near the shuttle, and its arm extended, pushing the bucket towards her. She leant eagerly forward.

But when the arm came to a halt, perfectly straight, the bucket was still nowhere near her. Not even close enough to think of risking a jump.

The arm folded back in on itself. There were some incoherent shouts, and then some men ran up with a ladder. But the ladder was not even as tall as the extender-arm, so what help would that be?

And then she watched as one of the ant people got out of the vehicle, and climbed up on top of it, into the bucket. And the men passed the ladder up to him.

And as the bucket began to rise up again, Benny saw that the man clutching the ladder was Adrian Wall.

The bucket was almost at its highest point when the shouts from below became more fevered. 'It's going to blow!'

Everyone out of the way! Adrian, come down from there!' The little people on the ground were running, but Adrian Wall got closer and closer.

'It's! Going! To! Blow!'

Adrian was holding the ladder against the side of the bucket, pushing the other end against the metal hull. It still didn't reach the airlock door. The Killoran stood up, pushing it nearer and nearer to Benny. With an effort, she could reach it.

'*Adrian!*' The shout came from below. '*Watch out!*'

Benny began to ease herself on to the ladder, horribly aware that only Adrian Wall's arm muscles were standing between her and a massive splat on the tarmac.

‘He’s down!’ yelled Adrian, almost making her jump.

And, to her horror, the vehicle began to trundle away from the shuttle. Now the ladder was waving about, the air pressure bending it this way and that. Oh Adrian! Please may your arms be as solid as concrete!

Slowly, she carried on down the ladder as the bucket-truck kept reversing. She reached the midpoint, and the swaying lessened. Adrian called up to her: ‘Oi!’

‘Yes?’ she shouted back.

‘Hold tight. We’re gonna bring it down.’

She didn’t get what he meant until she felt the first shudder.

The bucket was starting to descend. But they carried on reversing.

Finally they came to a halt, as a group of security men ran up to the vehicle. Benny was almost at the bottom of the ladder, but she couldn’t climb any lower without trampling on Adrian Wall, still standing rigid with his arm joints locked solid.

Men swarmed up on top of the truck. ‘Gotta take it from me,’ Adrian gasped. ‘Can’t unlock my arms without dropping him.’

The men grabbed the ladder, and Benny was lowered on to the truck. ‘*Quickly!*’ someone shouted. And then, ‘*Get down!*’

Benny’s feet had barely touched the floor when she was pushed down on to the grass. Men were lying all around her, their arms over their heads.

The shuttle exploded.

As the smoke cleared, Benny scrambled to her feet. She looked around desperately for Adrian Wall. Yes! There he was, standing off to one side, coughing a bit. She ran over to him and gave him a huge hug, and reached up to plant the biggest, juiciest kiss in the world right on his lips. ‘Thank you, Adrian,’ she gasped. Thank you so much.’

Rather to her surprise, Adrian pushed her roughly away.

‘Don’t mention it,’ he growled, and stamped off.

Several of the nearby security men seemed to be stifling laughter, and she realised what she looked like and what she’d done. Adrian’s machismo must have taken a serious knock when a beautiful boy gave him a smacker. Oops. When she got her body back, she’d apologise profusely. She’d even cook him dinner or something.

There was a shout from somewhere behind her. ‘Come back here!’

She turned to see the short squat form of Dominic hobbling towards her, looking rather the worse for wear. Poppy was with him. ‘Are you all right?’ he was calling.

Benny was quite touched. ‘I’m fine,’ she said, shrugging her shoulders in a brave sort of way. ‘Just a few bruises.’

‘A few bruises!’ Dominic had reached her now, and began to paw all

over her body.

‘Oi oi oi!’ Benny cried, waving her hands around to try to fend him off. ‘Stupid of me to think even for a second that you actually cared about *me*. And I am *not* showing you my bruises, even if it is nothing you’ve not seen before.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Hey! You locked me in a cupboard, you git!’

‘Well, obviously,’ said Dominic from ground level, where he was rolling up Benny’s left trouser leg to examine her knee.

‘Get off!’ said Benny. ‘And it doesn’t seem very obvious to me.’

‘We’d just been hit. I didn’t want my body being damaged by you falling all over the place. I was protecting it.’

Benny boggled at him. She turned to point at the column of smoke in the distance. ‘You call crashing a spaceship with me inside it protecting me?’

He gestured down at his current body. ‘Look at this! See what the smoke’s done to this skin! The cuts and bruises from being hit from all sides! These knuckles are grazed and this ankle is sprained and there are barely any eyebrows left. If I catch a glimpse of myself I throw up. I saved my body from all of this.’

Benny was almost screeching in disbelief. ‘And it never occurred to you that if I – the only one of us with flight experience *and* reasonable hand-eye co-ordination – was left to fly the shuttle, we might never have got into a situation where it became an issue? Or – and here’s a radical thought – you could have talked to me, asked me to wear shin-pads or something, rather than jumping me from behind and smothering me with pillows!’

Dominic eased himself off the ground up to his full height – which was about level with Benny’s nose. ‘You might not have agreed. And you’d allowed us to be hit once. I wasn’t taking any chances.’

Benny opened her mouth and then shut it again. Really, she couldn’t think of how to argue with someone who was on such an impossibly different wavelength from both her and reality.

‘Anyway, you’ve got what you wanted,’ Poppy jumped in, filling the silence. ‘We’re on your precious Braxiatel Collection.’

Benny glanced round at the security guards who were surrounding them, hands resting on their guns. ‘Oh yes. So we are.’ And then she remembered. ‘The crystal! Have you got the crystal!’

Poppy and Dominic exchanged glances, then Poppy shook her head. ‘I ran back to get it when we knew we were going down. But, of course, someone had had the bright idea of rigging up the safe so that Dommy and I couldn’t open it on our own. So I couldn’t get it.’ They both glared at Benny.

‘Oooh,’ said Benny, ‘here’s a wacky thought. Maybe you could try being trustworthy one of these days, then perhaps such bad things

wouldn't happen to you.' She turned to look at the distant wreck again. 'So we don't have the crystal?'

'That area was hit,' Poppy continued. 'No chance of getting back to it. And now look at it...'

Benny closed her eyes. She didn't want to look at it. And much as she appreciated the chance to be sarcastic at these two losers, that didn't alter the fact that without the crystal...

'It has to still be there...' she heard Dominic whisper. 'It has to be.' And Benny wondered how he would cope if it wasn't.

She reluctantly opened her eyes – which might remain her eyes for ever, now – and stared across at the smoking pile of metal in the distance. The fires had been put out now by Brax's hugely efficient security staff, but it was hard to tell that it had ever been a spacecraft. She thought of how easily Avril had shattered the very first crystal, as if it had been brittle glass, and of how the crystal cavern had disintegrated into dust, and of the tremendous force and heat of the explosion. The chances of that tiny, fragile lump of rock surviving were... not good. But miracles had been known to happen. Maybe the safe was unbelievably strong, or the explosion had just missed that area... 'Come on,' she said. 'We have to see for ourselves.' She began to walk back towards the wreck. Dominic and Poppy followed.

'Please stay where you are,' said one of the security guards.

'No,' said Benny. 'We're hardly going to try to escape in an exploded space shuttle, are we?'

'You are under arrest.'

'I know, I know, I know.' She stopped, and then walked right up to the man who'd spoken. 'Now let us go and have a look at our ship, Calvin Jersix,' she hissed, 'or I'll tell your wife you're having an affair with Security Sub Officer Tom Delaney. You can follow us with your guns,' she added at normal volume.

Jersix glared at her, but nodded. The procession all trooped over to the crash site. It was still smoking and steaming and radiating a huge amount of heat, and looked fairly unstable.

Dominic got into such a state when Benny tried to go close to it that she finally gave in and just let him and Poppy go and search. She wasn't worried about them double-crossing her –

Dominic wanted to find this crystal even more than she did.

Benny didn't like waiting. She'd never been any good at hanging around, she had to be *doing* something. And she couldn't help but think that she would be about thirty times more efficient at searching for elusive crystals than either Dominic or Poppy, because... well, just because. Ooooooh, she hated this waiting thing! They must have been looking for hours! Well, minutes, at least.

Suddenly there was a scream from over at the crash site. Had they

found it?! No, wrong sort of scream... Benny began to run over at top speed.

What she saw didn't seem to make sense at first. Dominic was lying on the ground, struggling to get away from the three guards and Poppy who were sitting on top of him. Poppy was clutching tightly to one of his arms, pushing it to the tarmac.

There seemed to be something held in his hand, and he was whimpering.

'What's going on?' yelled Benny when she got close enough.

'Have you found it? What's that?' She could see now that the object Dominic was grasping so hard was a jagged piece of wreckage. Why?

Poppy had finally managed to wrestle the lump of metal from Dominic's hand. 'He's lost it!' she called to Benny. 'Lost it completely!'

Benny knelt by Dominic's side. 'Oh Goddess,' she said.

Because she could see now what Dominic had been doing with the lump of metal. 'Call a medical team!' she called to Calvin Jersix. 'Now!'

She hurriedly tore off her shirt. Dominic had used the sharp fragment to slash at one of his wrists, and blood was pooling beside him. She bunched the shirt into a pad, and pressed it over the wound. 'Let his arm go,' she told the guard who was sitting on it. 'I need to lift it up.'

By the time the medics arrived, the wound had stopped bleeding. 'You were lucky,' said one of the team, a short blonde woman who Benny knew was called Sarah. 'Just a shallow wound. Could have been very nasty. It'll need to be cleaned up, though.'

'He's due to be deported,' said Jersix. 'Illegal entry, and he's wanted on Hera. A squad's arriving any time now to take him away.'

Oh help, thought Benny. They had to stay here long enough to see Brax...

'You can't move him!' she said. 'Can't you see what a state he's in? He tried to kill himself?' And then: 'Why?' she whispered in an aside to Poppy.

'We found the crystal,' the girl murmured back.

'Well, that's fantas-'

'Or rather, I should say – we found where the crystal had been. It was totally torpedoed.' She turned to look at the still-shivering Dominic. 'He couldn't cope. He couldn't bear to look like that for ever.'

'But that's ridiculous!' cried Benny. 'He was trying to kill himself because of that?'

'Yeah,' she nodded. 'Well, it's understandable, isn't it. Who'd want to be like that? Who'd want *him* like that.'

Benny was flabbergasted. 'I thought I was a bit shallow,' she said,

‘but are you seriously telling me that you’d abandon him if he had to stay with hairy hands and a beer gut for the rest of his life? You were telling him earlier that he was still the same person inside!’

Poppy didn’t seem to understand what Benny was getting at. ‘I was just trying to pep him up a bit. I never said that what was inside was any good.’

Benny turned her back on the girl. She couldn’t think what to say. She felt a sudden, completely irrational sympathy towards Dominic, and looked back to where he was being lifted on to a hoverstretcher. He stared up at her with haunted eyes. ‘It’s over,’ he whispered. ‘It’s all over.’

‘No, it isn’t!’ Benny insisted, wondering why she felt such a desire to reassure him. Her inherent humanity towards her fellow man, she thought, and felt a bit smug. ‘Avril had a crystal. And she’s here, somewhere. She’d have taken it with her. There’s still a crystal!’

‘Really?’ Dominic’s rheumy eyes filled with a sudden hope.

‘Yes!’ Benny told him. She didn’t mention that she really had no idea whether or not Avril had taken the crystal with her. It was highly probable, but she didn’t actually *know*... Come to that, they didn’t actually know if Avril was on the Braxiatel Collection... ‘Yes, really. I know there is.’

She spoke again to Jersix. ‘I think, Tom... sorry, did I say Tom? I wonder what I was thinking of? I mean, I think, Captain Jersix, that this man should be taken to a medical facility, and that none of us should be deported until we’ve explained our case to Irving Braxiatel in person.’

Jersix glared at her, and moved away to speak into a communicator. ‘No deal,’ he said when he got back. ‘You’ll all be put in the detention unit, which has perfectly adequate medical facilities, pending deportation. Mr Braxiatel is extremely busy on personal matters, and has asked not to be disturbed. But Mr Broderick Naismith has said he can spare you a few moments.’

‘Really?’ said Bernice, intrigued. ‘I’ve always wanted to meet him!’

Jersix gave her an odd look. That’s the best I can do,’ he continued.

‘All right, we’ll take it,’ Benny agreed. ‘But I hope you lay on decent meals in the detention centre.’

Actually, they did. Benny thought it was quite typical of Brax to provide quality service even for detainees. The three of them had been placed in adjacent cells, each with an open-grilled door on one side leading to a main room, a barred window on the other, and a comfy bed and a table and chair in between.

They had been provided with mineral water and a choice of healthy snacks. Benny fortified herself with two bananas. They even gave

Benny a clean shirt. She was feeling much happier now, though it wasn't as if the situation had changed all that much for the better. She just had this idea fixed in her head that if she could only get a message to Irving Braxiatel, everything would turn out all right. It sort of annoyed her a bit that she felt that way – she prided herself on her self-sufficiency usually – but she couldn't help it. Perhaps she really had lost a bit of confidence along with her body. Anyway, although she'd never met Broderick Naismith, she knew that as Brax's right-hand man he must be one of the good guys. And she'd be able to persuade him, get to Brax through him somehow.

And then she'd live happily ever after.

Benny had been staring out of the barred window ever since she'd been locked in the cell. If she angled herself just right, she could see the ornamental lake from here, and beyond it, a glimpse of the Mansionhouse. It wasn't quite close enough for her to make out the windows of her own rooms, but if she screwed up her eyes she could imagine she was seeing them.

Not one for putting all her eggs in one basket, she was harbouring a secret hope that someone would wander past –

Ms Jones, Mister Crofton, maybe even Brax himself – and she could call to them and talk her way out of here. It wasn't an improbable hope – the planetoid was so small that unless you stayed inside all day, you tended to pass through all points of the Collection at some stage.

You'd see everyone who lived here at some point. Oh yes.

But she hadn't let her mind take her that step further, see what that really meant... Because she hadn't expected to see this one particular person just wandering about as if she owned the place.

To all intents and purposes, Professor Bernice Summerfield had just walked down to the ornamental lake. Benny's first thought was, Oh, at least I still have my head. But then...

Professor Bernice Summerfield paused by the side of the lake.

Then Professor Bernice Summerfield began to take off her clothes. All her clothes.

'Nooooo!' yelled Benny, as Professor Bernice Summerfield jumped naked into the ornamental lake.

'What's going on in here?' called a guard from the main room.

Benny didn't tear herself away from the window to answer.

'I can't believe this!' she cried.

There was the sound of footsteps from the main room. The guard had obviously moved over to a window of his own, because he said, 'Oh, that's nothing to worry about. That's just Professor Summerfield. She's probably had a drop too much wine with lunch.'

'What?!' yelled Benny, distracted from the view for a second.

'I – she does not do things like that! She is not a drunkard who constantly embarrasses herself! She is an extremely nice person!'

The guard laughed. 'Keep your hair on. Ha! Looks like our Adrian Wall agrees with you!'

'What?!' Benny turned back to the window. A tall, wolf-like figure had joined Professor Bernice Summerfield at the lake.

She was holding out a hand to him. He was... oh goddess no... he was beginning to take his clothes off too. 'No no no no no!' cried Benny, rattling the window bars, as the Killoran climbed into the water too. 'This can't be happening to me!'

'Oh dear,' floated a voice from the next cell – Poppy's. 'Is that what you really look like? Can't understand why you're so desperate to find this crystal, hon.'

'Up yours,' called back Benny, wittily, staring at the scene outside as though hypnotised.

Professor Bernice Summerfield and Adrian Wall now seemed to be – she shuddered – *frolicking*.

This could not be allowed to go on.

She tiptoed as far away as possible from where she judged the guard to be, and pressed herself close to the dividing cell wall. 'Can you hear me?' she hissed.

'Yes,' Poppy hissed back. 'What do you want, Cellulite-girl?'

Benny gritted her teeth. 'I want you to keep talking,' she said. 'Make noise. Keep the guard's attention. I'm getting out of here. Don't worry –' she said, as Poppy began to protest,

'I'm not abandoning you. This is for everyone's good.'

'All right,' came the reluctant whisper back. And then loudly,

'Dommy? Can you see that woman out there? Hopeless case trying to relive her lost youth or what?'

Benny very carefully ignored her. She crept over to the cell door, and drew a nail file from her pocket, the one she had nicked from Dominic's room.

She even more carefully ignored Dominic's answering call, as she inserted the nail file into the lock and began to poke about.

'Has she no shame?' Dominic was saying. 'Amazing how a woman with so little to sag still manages to do so. I wouldn't be surprised if she was one of those women who were quite active in their youth, and assume that now they've become middle-aged they can still eat like a pig and get away with it. Oh look, she's getting out of the water. Just look at those thighs! And that stomach...'

'Perhaps she's had lots of children,' commented Poppy. 'I hear that can ruin a figure for life. It would certainly explain all that flab. And the sagging. And the stretch marks.'

'It would explain it, wouldn't it?' agreed Dominic. 'But she looks to

me – just an initial impression, you understand, it's not as if I once researched her in detail or anything – like the sort of woman who, even if she managed to brainwash some poor sod into marrying her, would chase him off within a month or two. And stupid though he may have been to fall for her in the first place, even he wouldn't have been able to stomach the thought of tying his genes to hers for all eternity.'

'You don't have to be married to have kids, babe,' Poppy pointed out. 'Bit old-fashioned of you there.'

'True,' said Dominic, 'but I'm basing this on the sort of woman I'm assuming her to be. Two obstacles to her having children: getting a man desperate enough to want her, and her own ridiculous prudery. You'd hardly believe it from looking at her now, but I would guess that she has moral issues. She doesn't do one-night stands – or not if she knows beforehand that's what they're going to be. And the only men desperate enough to do her wouldn't go back after they'd sobered up.

Or got what they wanted.' He sighed. 'It must be a sad life.'

The guard was laughing. 'Hark at you!' he said. 'And you don't even know her! Not that she's ever had children, as far as I know. Divorced and childless, it's said.'

Oh is it, thought Benny, easing the cell door open, is it indeed? Said by whom, exactly? (Even if it is true, her mind added parenthetically.) She was going to have a serious word with Brax about this particular guard's long-term prospects when all this was sorted out. It wasn't even as if he was very good at his job. He didn't notice Benny slipping out of the detention block at all.

By the time Benny got outside, Avril had gone. Damn. The only plus side was that at least she now knew for sure that the sorceress was on the Braxiatel Collection.

Benny knew that the best thing to do would be to get inside the Mansionhouse. There, she could find Brax – or go to her own room, the logical place for Avril to have left the crystal.

Unfortunately, she also knew that she needed top security clearance to enter there. And currently, of course, she had no security clearance at all.

She tried to think of a loophole. But she, together with Brax and Ms Jones, had thought of all the loopholes back at the design stage. She couldn't outwit her own brain...

She hunkered down beside a raised terrace, and gazed up at the beautiful giant building. How to get in? For goodness sake, they'd even given Wolsey his own tag and built a mass-detector into the doors so people couldn't get in on his – or anyone else's – security pass. And it wasn't as if anyone was able to charm their way past the

guardian of the security passes Ms Jones...

Oh gosh. She'd just had an idea. A wild, wacky, impossible idea...

No one could charm Ms Jones. No one could find a chink in her frosty armour. Except... Benny remembered how Ms Jones had reacted when she'd met Dominic. It was hard to believe, but Ms Jones was as much of a sucker for an exquisitely handsome face as Benny was. And as Benny happened to have sole – or rather, soul, ha! – access to an exquisitely handsome face just at the moment... she just had to hope that Ms Jones didn't know that she – Dominic – this body – had been in the shuttle crash, fleeing from justice. At least, thanks to Dominic's efforts with the blankets and pillows, she didn't look like she'd been in any sort of accident.

Benny crept round to the Reception Area, staying out of sight until she got to the entrance. Then she stood up purposefully, brushed herself down, and walked in.

Ms Jones didn't even look up as she entered. 'Yes?' she demanded in her high, squeaky voice.

'Hello again,' said Benny, as sensually as she could manage.

Ms Jones's gaze darted upwards, birdlike. Benny had to stifle a giggle as Ms Jones – instinctively, it seemed – put up a hand to check her bun of hair was in order.

Benny leant closer. She was rather pleased to note that Dominic's anatomy was not reacting in any way. Now that would have been worrying... 'I wasn't sure if you'd remember me,' she said.

Ms Jones actually looked a bit flustered – the first time ever.

'Of course I remember you, Mr Troy,' she said (trust Ms Jones to have found out Dominic's full name), 'it's just that... just that...'

'Yes?' said Benny, encouragingly.

'Well... Professor Summerfield seemed to be under the impression that you were dead! That you'd been killed on your little expedition. I mean, I admit that she didn't seem overly upset about it, but you can never tell what she's really thinking, I really don't know with that girl sometimes...'

Benny was getting quite tired of hearing what people really thought of her. 'I wasn't really killed,' she said, thinking quickly.

'But Professor Summerfield probably believed I was. That's why I'm here,' she said, staring deep into Ms Jones's watery grey eyes, 'I had to tell her I was okay. Oh, I know it's not strictly allowed...'

'No no no!' cried Ms Jones, 'I quite understand.'

'I've been through rather an ordeal,' sighed Benny, placing her hand on Ms Jones's desk, almost touching Ms Jones's own hand.

'You poor thing,' breathed Ms Jones. 'I'll get you a security pass at once. Exceptional circumstances... not just anyone... previous visitor... Professor Summerfield's state of mind... yes, yes, here you

are. That will give you access to the Mansionhouse.'

She handed Benny a small disk of pink plastic. Benny took it, letting her hand linger just that little bit longer than was strictly necessary. 'Thank you,' she said, meaning it with all her heart.

Ms Jones's voice floated after Benny as she walked through the inner door: 'Just be careful what you say to Professor Summerfield. She doesn't seem to be quite herself at the moment...'

Love Me, Love My Body

This was it. It was time. The way Benny had been in the lake... He knew she felt the same way.

He was so happy.

Benny almost skipped to the Mansionhouse. The day was definitely looking up.

She went up to Brax's private apartments first – but he wasn't there. She decided she had to leave him a note, just in case the worst happened and someone who didn't believe her story caught up with her. Of course, she didn't have paper or pen, and she didn't want to chance her luck popping into one of the departments, or going back to Ms Jones, to borrow some. In the end, she made her way to the nearest washroom and barricaded herself in, whilst she availed herself of a large quantity of paper towels and painstakingly crafted a message in carefully dribbled bleach from the bottle she'd been carrying in her pocket. Of necessity, the message was exceedingly short, and she struggled to express the essential details in as few words as possible. 'Brax. I = not me. Trapped in body D Troy =

Nico Lyence. If deported, please rescue. I am not making this up. Benny.' She waited a few moments to ensure the bleach wasn't going to run and obscure the message, then let herself out. It wasn't until she shut the door behind her that she realised she'd naturally gone in the ladies' room. Lucky no one had spotted her.

She carefully inched the towels through the tiny crack under Brax's door, and then set off for her own rooms. She had to hide a few times as other people passed by, but she knew the Mansionhouse like the back of her hand – her *own* hand – and was easily able to avoid them.

Eventually, she got to her apartment. She took a deep breath, and tried the door handle. It was locked. And, of course, she didn't have a key. Bugger. She banged her fist on the door.

A voice called from inside, 'Who is it?' It took Benny a moment to realise the voice was hers. Like you didn't recognise your own voice on tape, so it was hard to recognise it when someone else was using it.

Benny didn't answer, but knocked again.

'I said, who is it? I don't answer the door for just anyone.'

'You'd better let me in – Avril,' Benny said at last, not quite knowing what to do for the best.

There was a slight gasp, and then a laugh. 'I thought you were dead! How terribly resourceful of you to escape.'

‘So let me in. We have things to talk about.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. And don’t think you’ll be able to get anyone to believe the truth about me anyway, so you might as well not bother trying. I’m quite happy here in this old body you found me.’

Benny growled, and kicked the door hard. It didn’t help. She had requested a specially reinforced door, and all she achieved was a stubbed toe. Which would no doubt make Dominic suicidal if he ever saw it. But, despite the hopelessness, she kicked the door again.

Her foot went right through Wolsey’s cat flap. Yes!

She hurriedly bent down – on her hands and knees. The catflap was supposed to have a security field fitted, but obviously Adrian Wall had been too distracted with – she couldn’t quite bring herself to think it – *other things* to get it done yet.

She stuck her head through the cat flap. Avril didn’t seem to be in the study. But oh Goddess, what a mess she’d made of it!

When Benny thought of the hours of effort she’d put in to tidy the place up before – oh crikey, she was embarrassed just thinking about it – before Dominic had visited... This ancient evil needed a serious sorting out if it was going to mess with Benny’s decor.

She pushed herself forward. Unfortunately – very unfortunately – Benny had forgotten quite how much bigger Dominic’s shoulders were than her own. She got the first part of the rest of her through okay... and that was it. She tried to go back the way she’d come. No luck. She was stuck as firmly as Winnie-the-Pooh in the rabbit hole.

And just as she thought it couldn’t get any worse, Avril wandered into the study.

‘Oh, haven’t you gone yet?’ she said. She didn’t seem to have bothered to get dressed after her little swim, and her hair was still dripping wet. She was heavily made up, though, and Benny wondered where she’d found the warpaint. It certainly wasn’t from Benny’s drawers.

Suddenly Avril smiled, kneeling down by the cat flap as Benny grunted and gasped and tried to struggle free. ‘I’d forgotten just how adorable you are,’ she said, licking her crimson lips. Benny resolved never, ever to try licking her lips seductively. It just didn’t suit her.

Avril put out a hand. ‘I’m re-exploring sensations,’ she said.

‘You’re not really my type, but would you like to help me anyway?’

‘Back off!’ Benny yelled.

To Benny’s surprise, Avril did so. She was looking puzzled.

‘That’s not right,’ she was mumbling. Then her face cleared.

‘Of course!’ she beamed. ‘That’s it! The displacement I can sense... you’re not that man, are you. You’re her.’ She gestured down at Benny’s true body. ‘You’re Bernice Summerfield.’

‘So give my body back, you ancient cow!’ Benny shouted.

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ said Avril. She knelt down beside Benny again. ‘Not before I’ve experienced everything...’ She reached across to Benny and stroked her cheek.

‘Oi!’ yelped Benny, trying desperately to wriggle away. The yelp was surprisingly high-pitched; Benny could almost imagine it was her own voice speaking.

Avril was still smiling, and held out her hand again. Benny noticed that the fingernails had been painted blood-red to match her lips – stereotypical vamp stuff. Had people really believed this was her?

Avril stroked Benny’s cheek again. And – oh ugh ugh! Benny – no, not Benny, this stupid male body – actually liked it.

Oh Goddess. She fancied herself.

‘Has anyone ever told you you’re gorgeous?’ Avril purred, her fingers feathering down Benny’s cheek and on to her neck.

‘Yes!’ Benny yelped again. ‘And I look more gorgeous without layers of slap like that, I can tell you. And are those really my eyelashes? I’m sure they were shorter on me.’

‘It’s quite obvious to me that you never made the most of this body,’ Avril said. ‘You neglected it. You didn’t deserve it. I shall make so much better use of it.’

‘Ha!’ Benny cried defiantly. ‘You are completely mistaken if you think you’ll have the chance. That body is mine, and I’m getting it back.’

‘Really? How? You’re stuck in a cat flap.’

‘I’ll... I’m not telling you my plans!’

Avril laughed, and Benny winced at how ridiculously girlish it sounded. ‘I don’t think so. I’m rather keen on keeping it, and I usually get my own way. Anyway, just look at the one you have now. That’s the one I was talking about when I said you were gorgeous. And I want it.’

‘You’re getting greedy,’ Benny said. ‘You’ve got one of my bodies, you can’t have this one too.’

Avril laughed again, throwing her head back and showing her teeth. Benny had never noticed that her canines were quite so long. ‘I don’t want you –’ she pointed at Dominic’s body –

‘like *that*. I want you like *this*...’ She began to stroke Benny’s neck. It was quite, quite wonderful. And then with a suddenness that made Benny gasp, Avril put her hands on Benny’s shoulders and shoved her so hard that she popped back through the cat flap like a cork from a bottle.

Benny stayed on her hands and knees, dazed, for a second.

Shouldn’t she run? Or something? But then the door opened, and she found herself pulled to her feet and dragged inside her own study...

Avril pushed her back against the door. Benny just stood there. And then Avril's scarlet fingernails began to unlace Benny's shirt.

Benny found her voice again. 'Aaargh! You can't do that!'

'But I'm doing it. You don't seem to be trying to stop me.'

Avril was easing the shirt off Benny's shoulders.

'Stop that!'

'You don't really want me to stop, do you?' The shirt fell to the floor, and Avril's fingers skittered across Benny's chest.

Benny tried to grab at her wrists, but she seemed to be frozen to the spot.

'It's not me!' Benny whispered. 'It's this stupid, stupid body.'

Avril was shaking her head. 'It's your mind in there. The mind controls the body, didn't you know that?' She began to nuzzle at Benny's neck, and Benny was letting her. It was as if she were hypnotised.

Avril moved even closer, pressing herself against Benny. She took Benny's hand in hers, and cupped it over her right breast.

'After all,' Avril continued, softly, 'who would know better than you how to please me?'

The spell broke. Benny pushed her away and ran into the bedroom. Avril's laughter floated after her. 'You can run, but you can't hide! Nike the chase best of all...'

Benny slammed the bedroom door behind her, and leaned on it, panting. Oh Goddess, she couldn't cope with this for much longer... All her previous experience had not prepared her to face a nymphomaniac millennia-old sorceress who fancied her. No, no, that was wrong. Nymphomaniac millennia-old sorceresses should be a piece of cake. It was the body thing that was making it two-thousand times more difficult. If she could just try to adjust her mental attitude; block that problem from her mind...

But before she had even begun mental-attitude-adjusting, she heard a knock on the study door, and a shout. 'Benny? Benny, are you there?'

It was Adrian Wall. Almost exactly the person she least wanted to see in the whole world – someone who knew she was a wanted criminal, and who didn't have the imagination to accept any explanations that Benny could offer him.

And who, from what she was now hearing through the door, seemed to have fallen in love with her. Or rather, what he thought was her.

Oh Goddess.

Adrian had entered the study. 'Benny? I thought I heard you talking to someone.'

Benny's own voice in reply: 'You must have imagined it, darling.'

Darling?

‘You wouldn’t cheat on me, would you? Not now that we’ve... discovered each other like this?’

Like what, exactly? Benny panicked.

‘Adrian... honey... how long have you known me? You can trust me.’

No you can’t! Benny yelled internally, desperately wanting to charge out there and break this up, but too afraid to confront Adrian. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for a way out of this.

And she looked out of the large bedroom window, with its wonderful view down to the lawn.

And saw Irving Braxiatel just wandering past, looking as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

She ran over to the window and began banging on it and shouting as loud as she could. ‘Brax! Brax! *Irving!*’

He didn’t even glance round. Benny closed her eyes, wondering how she could have been so stupid. One-way glass, sound-proofed. She’d insisted. She hadn’t wanted any old Tom, Dick or Harry out for a walk round the grounds to be able to look at her in bed.

She dropped to her knees, fumbling for the bottom window catch – but too late. A huge hairy hand grabbed hold of her shoulder and spun her round. ‘You!’ snarled Adrian, raising his fist, drawing it back, Benny tried to duck but the fist was smashing towards her and Avril, behind him, was laughing...

‘Adrian! Please don’t do that,’ said Irving Braxiatel.

Adrian lowered his arm. ‘Sorry, Mr Braxiatel,’ he mumbled.

‘That’s all right, Adrian.’ Brax unhooked Benny’s blue dressing gown from the back of the bedroom door and handed it to Avril. ‘Why don’t you put this on?’ he suggested.

‘You must be cold.’ Then he looked straight at Bernice, and pulled a soggy sheet of paper towelling from his pocket. ‘I got your note, Benny,’ he said.

Death to the Diaries

Benny was still hugging Braxiatel. She'd been glued in place since he first spoke to her, and although it was a bit odd being taller than him, she'd never felt quite so comforted.

Brax had sent Adrian Wall to the detention centre to fetch "Bill" and Poppy. He'd seemed a bit reluctant to go, but Brax had insisted.

Then Brax had popped into the study to call Ms Jones from Benny's vid-phone, asking her to hold off the Heran authorities and issue special temporary passes to their 'visitors'. Benny kept hold of him the whole while.

Then they went back into the bedroom, and Brax turned to Avril, who was curled up on Benny's bed. 'So,' he said.

'So what?' she replied. 'I don't understand what's going on here. Why is that man hugging you, Irving?'

'Ah,' said Brax. 'Am I to understand that you deny that "this man" is really my old friend Bernice Summerfield?'

Avril's jaw dropped. If Benny hadn't known the truth, she might have believed Avril was thoroughly astonished.

'Pardon?' the woman laughed in Benny's voice, 'What are you trying to say? *I'm Bernice Summerfield*. Of course I am. Don't you recognise me – *old friend?*'

'Like heck you are!' Benny burst out, letting go of Brax, 'I'm Bernice Summerfield and you're nothing like me at all! Brax can tell the difference!'

'So – and excuse me for stating the obvious – why is it that I look like Bernice Summerfield and you look like an extremely tall young man?'

'Actually,' said Brax before Benny could answer, 'I was wondering that. This note Benny left me didn't go into that issue.' He held out the paper towel.

Avril took it, read it, and shrugged dismissively. 'It's not even in my handwriting.'

'Well of course it's not!' Benny yelled, 'I wrote it by dripping bleach on the page! A bit hard to dot your I's and cross your T's when you're doing that!'

'And even harder if it's not your handwriting in the first place. Now, you still haven't given any explanation for this extraordinary story,' Avril reminded her.

Benny took a deep breath, and looked at Irving Braxiatel. 'I think

it's too long to go into now, unless you really want me to,' she said. 'But the basics – the guy whose body this is –' she gestured down at herself – 'Dominic Troy, otherwise known as the war criminal Nico Lyence – and give me one good reason why I'd tell you that if I really were him – and I found the Crystal Sorceress, Avril Fenman. The legend's all true, Brax,' she continued, ignoring Avril's snort of incredulous laughter, 'and there have been crystals turning up all over the place. And how it's turned out is that she, Avril Fenman, has my body, I've ended up with Dominic Troy's, and he looks like a Heran guard called Bill.'

Avril had wandered over to a chest of drawers near the bed.

She picked a book off of the top and held it up so Braxiatel could see the title. *The Adventure of the Crystal Cavern*, she said. 'A fiction for children. This madman has obviously taken it as inspiration for his tale, though I have no idea what he intends to gain from it all. But it can't possibly be true. Crystals that allow you to swap souls? How perfectly ridiculous!'

'You don't even talk like me!' Benny squawked. She twisted her face. "'How perfectly ridiculous.'" I don't sound anything like that!'

Avril gave her a pitying look, then turned her attention back to the book, which she opened. "'It was long ago, when the trees were just saplings and the suns were big and yellow. The people were all happy..."', she began. 'Oh, *please!* Just a small question – if I were an ancient sorceress, how could I read this modern language? How could I speak it?'

'Ah!' beamed Brax. 'An excellent question. I had just been wondering the same thing myself.'

'I don't know!' said Benny, flinging up her arms in despair. 'I don't know how magic works! No, no, don't tell me, there's no such thing as magic... I don't know how this weird thing beyond my scientific understanding works, then, if you prefer... perhaps it comes automatically because she's in my head. It doesn't matter! I am so obviously Benny that it hurts!'

'I have to say, if you are not Benny you've studied her vocal patterns very thoroughly indeed,' Brax said.

'Irving!' Avril yelled, flinging herself at him. 'This man's barking mad! Loony as a lake full of loons! *I'm* Benny!'

Brax looked thoughtful. 'Hmm,' he said to Avril. 'That was a much better effort. I think you're beginning to get the hang of it.' 'Look,' Benny said desperately, 'we found this woman in an underground cave right under the surface of the Braxiatel Collection! She'd been waiting there for thousands of years!'

'An underground cave?' said Avril. 'Well, of course I know that such things exist, but waiting in a cave for thousands of years – really, it

does sound more and more like a children's story every minute. Wouldn't I have got bored, stuck in a cave for so long?'

Brax cleared his throat. 'While this is a very interesting addition to the tale,' he said, 'it really does puzzle me. You see, I had extensive geological surveys taken of this planetoid, and I can assure you there are no underground caves of any sort here.'

'Oh, but that's the really clever part,' said Benny. 'I did a bit of detective work – people seem happier to tell you things when they think you're the bad guy – well, the big baddie behind it all was Arsine De Vallen. You know him of course.'

Brax frowned. 'Indeed I do.'

'He was obsessed with the legend of the Soul-Sucker – Avril here,' she added, pointedly. Avril just turned a disbelieving gaze to the ceiling. 'Is this going to be a long story?' she sighed, sitting herself down on Benny's bed.

'I'll try and make it bearable for those with short attention spans,' said Benny, and turned back to Brax. 'De Vallen was from Hera, the planet where the legends originated, and he funded a lot of excavations there. But then – I'll tell you the details later – they found out that her final resting place was on planetoid KS-159. Imagine his rage when almost at the exact moment of his greatest discovery, KS-159 became the Braxiatel Collection. Knowing how you feel about each other, he knew there was no way of excavating here legitimately – and anyway what he really wanted was to find the location of the Crystal Cavern, and he knew you'd never be a party to that.'

'It seems an odd question to ask about a madman,' said Braxiatel, 'but do you know why he was thus obsessed?'

'Yup,' said Benny. 'He was old, crippled, and dying. He wanted a new body for himself. And by a stroke of fate, he found someone who was not only a mercenary prepared to do all the dirty work for him, but who, at the end of it, would provide the perfect new body.' She shot a quick glance at the wardrobe mirror, and shivered. 'A pretty ruthless kind of guy.'

'Interesting,' murmured Avril. 'I notice you've still not come up with an explanation for these impossible caves, though?'

'I wouldn't be so keen to hang my argument on that point if I were you,' said Benny. 'After all, I can show Brax these

"impossible caves" just by taking him out for a short walk. And Adrian Wall can back me up: his bulldozer fell down one. Now, if I could just carry on with what I was saying? Thank you,' she added, to Avril's silence.

'The geological surveys were all wrong,' she continued slowly. 'No –' to Brax – 'I know what you're going to say, that that's impossible. But it's not at all, really. De Vallen had almost as many resources as

you do. He had the surveys intercepted noted the most probable locations of Avril's lair, and his agents sent amended versions of the surveys on to you. But even so he knew it'd be only a matter of time before the cave – if it existed – was discovered during the construction work. He really needed an agent on the spot, but couldn't hope to get one past you, and time was running out.

'But he got lucky. Before the work had reached the most likely spot, you went off planet. I think he probably managed to screw up your communications somehow too, so you were unreachable. Which meant that his gorgeous agent could wangle his way on to Brax by hoodwinking some poor, gullible woman who'd even sort out the excavation for him. And the rest, as they say, is archaeology.'

'How utterly, utterly ludicrous,' sighed Avril

'On the contrary,' said Braxiatel. 'It seems extremely plausible, if highly complex.'

'And why in the name of the Goddess would I make up a story like that anyway?' Benny demanded.

'Mental instability...' suggested Avril. 'After all, if you believe you're me...'

'The crystal!' Benny suddenly cried. 'We think that Avril managed to take a crystal away with her. At least, I'm hoping with all my heart that she did, because I do not want to have man-bits for ever. Last time I saw her she had hold of a crystal, and there wouldn't be a risk in keeping it if she thought Dominic was dead... If the crystal's here, you'll *have* to believe me! And I can get my body back,' she added in an aside.

Avril waved a red-clawed hand expansively. 'Search where you like,' she smiled. 'You won't find a crystal.'

'You'd better hope I do...' growled Benny, moving over to the chest of drawers. 'I am not going to just let you have my body like that.'

'Really? And what are you going to do about it – *war criminal?*'

Benny ignored her, and began to rummage through the drawers. 'Hey!' she cried after a minute. 'What have you done with my best knickers?'

Avril shot a look up at the ceiling. Benny followed her eyes, and saw the jade green silk hanging from the chandelier.

'Perhaps I should rephrase the question,' she said levelly. 'What the heck have you been *doing* in my best knickers?'

Benny really didn't like the sly smile Avril gave her in response.

Benny searched and searched. Admittedly she could never usually find things that she knew were definitely in her apartment, like library books and the other sock of a pair, and people's telephone numbers that she'd written down somewhere where she absolutely wouldn't

lose them; but she did know all the potential *proper* hiding places – and the crystal wasn't in any of them.

She was getting close to admitting defeat. Might as well just reclaim her knickers, and accept life with dangly bits and facial hair. She dragged a chair out into the middle of the room – she couldn't normally reach the chandeliers without a ladder, but with Dominic's extra height...

One of the nicest things about being Benny in AD 2600 was the decor. Who'd ever have thought that little orphan Bernice Summerfield would end up in a mansion with Chinese rugs and crystal chandeliers? *Crystal* chandeliers...

What better place to hide a tree than in a forest?

She shot a look at Avril. The sorceress was gazing intently at Benny's every move, a look of concern on her face. Yes. This was it.

Benny clambered on to the chair and, balancing expertly – she sure was going to miss Dominic's muscles when she got her own body back – she reached up to the chandelier, and pulled off the undies. Then she stretched up again...

There was a stifled gasp from Avril. Yes!

But where was the crystal? It had to be here! Benny was poking into every nook and cranny, shaking the chandelier this way and that, running her hands over each shimmering gem until the tinkling, jingling sounds made her eardrums ring.

Nothing.

'Oh bollocks,' she said. 'And also, bugger.'

As the pendants jangled to a standstill, Benny could hear suspiciously familiar laughter coming from the direction of the bed.

'I think perhaps you should come down from there,' said Brax. 'I think you may have been – how can I put it? – barking up the wrong tree.'

'Made you look!' called Avril.

'Ooh, you scheming cow!' cried Benny, jumping off the chair – and landing more heavily than she'd expected. The sooner she got her own body back the better. Ha, if she'd had a dollar for every time she'd thought that over the past couple of days, she'd have enough to pay for cosmetic surgery to recreate her old look, crystal or no. 'What sort of bitch are you that you find this funny?' she wondered.

Avril frowned. 'You know, that's very interesting,' she said.

'Well, good!' said Benny. 'I'm glad that my agony is providing you with a suitable opportunity for self-reflection!'

'Oh no, that's not what I meant,' said Avril, shaking her head.

'I just noticed that when you wished to insult me, you used terms with a female association, such as "cow" or "bitch". But when you were expressing annoyance with yourself – when you failed to find the

crystal – you used words with a *masculine* connotation: “bollocks” and “bugger”. Showing that you think of me as a woman, and yourself as a man. In other words, you’re subconsciously indicating that I am the real Bernice Summerfield, and you are actually –’ she gestured at Dominic’s body – ‘that guy.’

Benny’s mouth was wide open in astonishment. ‘That’s boll– I mean... you’re talking absolute rubbish! That’s how I always speak! Brax knows that I wouldn’t think... that... deeply about things, um, that came out wrong, you know what I mean...’

‘Do I?’ said Avril. ‘It sounds extremely suspicious, wouldn’t you say, Brax?’

Brax didn’t answer. But he was looking very interested.

‘So you’re trying to say that you don’t use masculine terms because you’re a man?’

‘No! They’re just... random expressions of displeasure.’

‘Terms of abuse, in other words. So what you’re actually saying is that you’re really a woman, but to “express your displeasure” with yourself, the most insulting things you can think of to say are male-oriented. So if you were really female Bernice Summerfield, you’ve just proved yourself to be a man-hating prejudiced bigot. Which I – I’m sorry, she – is obviously not – and so you can’t possibly be her. Is that what you’re telling us?’

‘No! I mean, yes! Will you please stop using my voice to talk nonsense? I’m sorry if I offended you by comparing you to a female ox, elephant, whale, dog, hippopotamus or moose – which, incidentally, belies your “bigot” thing, as I’m obviously prejudiced about both genders – but I was not using male terminology in a man-hating way, or self-referentially because I believe I am a man, but just because they’re interesting sounding oaths, and maybe I should chose my words more carefully in future, so if you want to believe you’ve taught me a moral lesson go ahead and do so if it’ll make you happy, but I am a woman, I am Bernice Summerfield, and I need to breath in so please excuse me.’ Benny stopped talking, and took a few deep breaths.

‘I always like to think that, as a respected author and academic, I can express myself clearly...’ murmured Avril from her curled up position on the bed. ‘And you haven’t found this crystal you insist exists... if there’s no crystal, how could you possible be Bernice Summerfield?’

‘Me not finding the crystal doesn’t prove a thing,’ Benny snapped back. ‘For a start, we don’t know you definitely had one, however much I’m hoping – and for another thing, if you did have one, you could have hidden it anywhere on Brax! Or even on Hera,’ she said, worried for a moment. ‘But no, no, that’s highly unlikely,’ she

continued, reassuring herself.

‘Crystal or no crystal, I am Benny.’

‘I’m Benny.’

‘I’m Benny. It’s so obvious!’ Benny turned to Braxiatel, who was looking back and forth between the two of them as if he were watching a tennis match. ‘Brax, *pleeease* say you believe me? Surely all that bollocks stuff – I mean, the stuff about bollocks – not my bollocks – not that I have any – well, I do, but it’s not me – oh, you know what I’m talking about; surely that proved that she’s not me?’

Brax just smiled. ‘Actually, I was thinking of suggesting a small test. A test that only the real Bernice could pass. How would you feel about that?’

‘Fine!’ said Benny. ‘Absolutely fine! If that’s what it takes to convince you – which is fairly worrying, but I suppose the visual evidence gets in the way – then fire away! Ask me anything you like!’ She looked at Avril, hoping to see her face fall. After all, she couldn’t hope to manage this. But Avril was smiling.

‘Fine by me too,’ she said. How come?

‘I shall ask you both a series of questions,’ Brax continued.

‘Each has only one correct answer.’

‘Oooh, Benny Twenty Questions,’ said Benny. ‘What fun.’

‘An easy one to start off with,’ Brax said. ‘Number one: who was Bernice’s first boyfriend? Why did they separate? You may answer first,’ he added to Avril.

‘That’s hardly fair!’ she said. ‘*He’ll* be able to copy the correct answers from me!’

‘Oh, I’m sure you’re worrying about nothing,’ said Brax, reassuringly. ‘Just answer the question.’

‘Well, I rather wished you hadn’t brought up that particular issue,’ said Avril. ‘It’s too, too annoying to have to think about exes.’

‘Ha, you don’t know!’ said Benny.

Avril looked scornful. ‘His name was Simon Kyle, a military cadet, and I dumped him to concentrate on my studies.’

Benny looked at her, open-mouthed. And then realisation struck. ‘You’ve been reading my diaries! How could you? Don’t you know that a diary is the most private personal thing a person owns?’

‘I hardly think it’s a crime to read my own diary!’ began Avril hotly, but Braxiatel shushed her.

‘Perhaps if I could have your answer?’ he said to Benny.

‘Right,’ said Benny. ‘My first boyfriend. His name was Simon Kyle, and he was a military cadet.’ Avril rolled her eyes. ‘*And*,’ continued Benny, ‘he... well, he shopped me to the authorities. I don’t like to think about that.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Brax. ‘It seems that one of you – though I won’t

specify which one – really doesn't understand the nature of Bernice's diaries.' But he acknowledged the answers with a nod. 'Now, for my next question – something a little more recent, I think. Where is Wolsey?'

'What a ridiculous question!' snorted Avril. 'It's just a question of looking for him – my dear little cat. It won't prove a thing. All I can tell you is that he's not in here. I expect he's lying in the sun somewhere. Or chasing a mouse.'

'And your answer?' Brax said to Benny.

'I can't tell you where he is either,' she said. 'Not exactly, that is. As he's not curled up on my bed, he could be anywhere in the Collection.'

'Ah...' said Brax.

'But,' continued Benny, glancing at the wall-chronometer, 'I would hazard a guess that wherever he is, he's heading this way. It's nearly his tea-time, you see. And whether I'm home or not, he pops back just to check if there's any food around – and mew in a severely disapproving way if there isn't. I have no idea how he manages to tell the time, but, somehow, he does. One of the endless mysteries of cat, I suppose.'

Brax smiled. 'Indeed. But now the final question. Which two people do Bernice love most in the entire world? You first,' he said, indicating Avril.

Avril looked slightly flustered for the first time. 'That's a ridiculous question,' she said. 'There's no given answer; it's subjective. You couldn't know who was telling the truth unless you could read – my – mind.'

'Nevertheless, I would like you to answer,' Braxiatel said.

'Then... my father,' Avril said. 'Isaac Summerfield. And... and... you. My dearest friend. Who gave me a home here.'

'Oh, flattery will get you nowhere,' Benny snapped. She turned to Brax. 'You know I care for you deeply,' she said to Brax. 'You probably are my dearest friend. But I don't think that was the answer you're looking for. It's very hard to say... but perhaps the two people who are closest to my heart – and it doesn't make me very happy to admit this – are Jason...'

'That's ridiculous!' cried Avril. 'I can't stand Jason! I was glad when he left, and I can't think of him without disdain! Every entry in my diary proves that!'

'And your second answer?' Brax asked.

'I think... Wolsey.'

'A cat is not a person!' Avril shouted.

'Funny that,' said Benny. 'Because I've been a cat, and Wolsey's been a human. And I'm pretty sure that, in this case at least, I'm right.'

At that moment, there was a noise from the study: the sound of

plastic swinging back and forth. Wolsey the cat came sauntering in, walked over to Benny and began to purr round her ankles.

‘I think he’s hungry,’ said Brax.

‘I think I’ve just won,’ said Benny. She picked up Wolsey and pretended to fly him around the room in celebration. He suffered this indignation with grace and poise, but walked away hurriedly when finally released. ‘I’ll feed you in moment, Wols,’ Benny called after him. ‘Just got to get my body back first!’

Wolsey mewed indignantly, and went back into the study. A second later they heard the swish of the cat flap again.

‘I think you’re forgetting something,’ Avril said.

Benny slapped her forehead. ‘You’re right! I don’t have any cat food in.’

‘I meant, whether or not you have the mind of Bernice, I have the body. And I think you’ll find that possession is nine-tenths of the law.’ She smiled.

‘And I think you’ll find that mush is nine-tenths of your brain,’ said Benny, ‘Because I’m getting it back somehow, believe me.’

‘Your brain, sweetie. Although operated by my mind.’

‘Oh, don’t go all dualist on me,’ said Benny, ‘Oh yes, I forgot that your actual brain is a bit mummified at the moment, isn’t it?’ ‘That was no more my brain than this is!’ she laughed. ‘I possessed it, that is all. It was just a tool.’

‘Well, if you think you’re going to use my brain as a tool –’

Benny began, but Brax shushed her.

‘I think we have visitors, ladies,’ he said, smiling.

Benny hadn’t heard the main door opening, but Adrian, Dominic and Poppy were standing in the bedroom doorway – well, Adrian’s massive bulk was taking up most of the doorway while the other two, looking rather tiny and insignificant beside him, were crowded behind. Much to Benny’s amusement, Adrian had tied the wrists of the other two together, and was leading them by a rope. He caught her look. ‘Well, they’re dangerous criminals, aren’t they,’ he growled.

‘Yes, Adrian,’ she said sincerely, ‘they are.’

Dominic was straining towards her. ‘Let me see me!’ he called.

She sighed theatrically. ‘Oh, your body’s perfectly safe,’ she said. ‘I’m sure the scratches from Wolsey will soon heal – unless they become infected – and I’m afraid that everyone laughed when I gave them a sneak peek at your man-bits, but –’

Dominic started yelling and tried to push past Adrian Wall.

Benny suddenly realised that she was teasing a man who had tried to kill himself only a few hours ago, and felt cold inside.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said hastily. ‘It was a stupid joke. Really.’

Don’t become one of the monsters, Bernice.

Poppy was trying to stroke Dominic's face with her bound wrists. It would have been quite funny if Benny hadn't been hating herself at that moment.

'Shh, hon,' Poppy was saying. 'Remember what Broderick Naismith said.'

Dominic stopped struggling, and smiled at that. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'll remember.'

Poppy sighed. 'What a guy!'

Dominic nodded. 'Yeah. Pretty special.'

Benny boggled at them. 'What? What did he say? What's he like?'

But Brax had put a hand on her shoulder. 'I think we should get this over with as soon as possible,' he said. 'We have to find that crystal. Because, yes, I believe there is one,' he added, as Avril laughed. 'Adrian, could you get all your men to begin searching the grounds, please? I will have Ms Jones arrange a search of the buildings.'

'Hang on a sec,' Benny said before Adrian could leave, 'Tell your men not to stare into it if they find it, Adrian. Not that I'm implying Killorans have weak minds or anything,' she added hastily.

'And who are you to give me orders, "gigolo"?' Adrian growled back at her.

Oops.

Ah.

Um...

'Never mind that just now, Adrian,' said Brax, placatingly.

'Could you go and arrange that search for me, please? We'll be perfectly all right with the two... prisoners,' he added, as Adrian gestured at Dominic and Poppy.

The five of them – Brax, Benny, Avril, Dominic and Poppy – went into the study to sit down. Benny chose to sit behind her desk, because it made her feel more in charge and, she felt, emphasised to everyone that she was the *real* Bernice Summerfield. Brax and Avril sat on the sofa, and Dominic and Poppy, still tied together, perched on the loveseat.

'Well, this is nice,' said Benny, surveying the room.

At which point she noticed the marble fireplace. Or rather, as she had of course seen the fireplace many times before, she noticed what was in it.

At first it didn't really register. She saw that a fire had been lit there, though it was burning low. She saw that there were papers scattered around it.

She saw a fragment of bright yellow paper waft from the embers as a draft stirred the dying flames.

She realised what it was. '*Oh G oodess, no!*' she cried, and flung herself out of the chair, pushing it back so hard that it snagged on the

priceless antique rug and tumbled over.

She was over at the fireplace in an instant, scrabbling about, trying to pull bits of diary from the pyre.

Now Dominic was yelling, and he was at her side, dragging Poppy after him, trying to pull her back. 'My hands!' he was imploring her, 'Mind my hands!'

Brax was there too, and gently eased Benny away. He knelt down beside the fireplace, then looked up at her sadly. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'This fire has been burning a long time.'

Anything that was going to be burnt, has been.' He pushed the surviving papers further away, and then smothered the tiny glow that still remained in the fireplace. 'Even if you'd noticed this when you first arrived, you would not have been able to do any more.'

Benny was filled with the most intense rage and hatred she could remember for a long time. People trying to kill her, she could potentially forgive, but this...

Brax – as usual – was reading her mind. 'I know they were precious to you, Benny,' he said, putting an arm around her – half to comfort her, she suspected, and half to hold her back from doing serious damage to Avril. 'I know they are, in most senses, irreplaceable. But you must not, when the anger has passed, think that in any way the memories or experiences themselves have been destroyed. I think that the last few days have proved to you without a shadow of a doubt that the essential Bernice Summerfield can exist without any physical bonds.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Benny. 'Well, just at this moment I'd rather have my diaries back than my body. And I know you're perfectly right, Brax, and thank you for the words of wisdom, but the only thing that will make me feel better right at the moment is punching seven daylight's out of that diary-destroying cow!'

Brax's arm tightened around her shoulders. 'You'd only be hurting yourself, Benny,' he said. 'And I mean that one-hundred per cent literally.'

She nodded. It didn't make the feelings go away.

'My whole life was in there...' she said.

'Oh, you poor thing,' said Avril. Benny felt Brax's arm tighten even more. 'You've lost a few possessions. You want your own body back. You feel your home has been violated. Well, I am so sorry. Perhaps you could consider just for a second what it's like to have no home, no possessions, no body of your own to go back to. After a few thousand years of that, maybe I'll feel sorry for you.'

Benny gazed at her, open-mouthed. 'I'm sorry?' she said.

'Are you saying that it's okay to trash other people's things just because you've spent a few millennia with none of your own? Well, if

that's not the most selfish, childish –'

'And because you don't care about your own body, it's okay to stick my hands in the flames?' yelled Dominic at Benny. She turned to look at him, sitting on the floor now with Poppy by his side. It looked like she'd been holding him back too.

Benny was really miffed then. 'I'm not sure why you want your body back so badly,' she snapped. 'After all, it's just going to rot in prison for ever.'

'Really?' Dominic said. Strangely, the thought seemed to have calmed him down. 'You have no idea, do you. The potential of that body – *my* body – is beyond your comprehension. You've had it for days, and all you've used it for is walking from a to b, or, or, or lifting heavy objects. You have no idea! I can use the power of my body to get anything I want. Have me arrested, have me put on trial – I'll always be able to get out of it somehow. There's always someone who can't resist me; who'd do anything for me.'

'I was also planning on making sure those people from the Fifth Axis find out you're alive,' Benny pointed out, so full of anger, and disgust – both at Dominic's arrogance and at the memory that she had once been one of the poor saps who'd have done anything for him – that she completely forgot that she was trying not to be really nasty to him.

He didn't smile, but shook his head. Somehow she realised it wasn't just pure arrogance – because he was telling nothing but the truth. 'I'd get out of it somehow,' he said. 'They tried to kill me before, on Galamanus, but they could never have succeeded. There's always going to be someone who will risk their life to warn me. There's always going to be someone –' and here he looked at Poppy – 'who will risk their life to save me. Hide me. Do whatever it takes.'

'If the bubble of your self-confidence ever bursts, the noise'll wake a galaxy,' Benny said. 'Look, I'm not being mean or funny here – but what are you going to do when you get old? When you get wrinkles, or varicose veins? You'll never survive. You'd have to have some serious amount of cosmetic surgery to keep you looking the way you are.'

Dominic shivered. But to her surprise, it was not because of the idea of ageing... 'Never,' he hissed. 'No one changes me. No one operates on me. I am perfect. I will continue to be perfect, whatever age I am. And I will always know that it is entirely *me*. No scalpels, no fakery. I will *never* become unnatural.'

'Gosh,' said Benny. She thought about getting into a debate about the use of moisturisers and laser-razors and haircuts if he wanted to be entirely natural, but decided against it. Everyone has grey areas.

That sparked another thought, and she glanced at Avril. No, even

from this independent angle her hair looked jet-black still.

Not that she'd mind, actually, now she came to think about it.

It would be rather distinguished. And there and then she resolved to go grey with grace, if it ever happened. She felt quite smug about it. *She* wasn't obsessed with her appearance, oh no. And now she came to look at it from an outside point of view, that little beer belly was actually quite cute. She'd keep that, too.

When she got her body back. It had better be soon, or she would go quite, quite nuts.

'They're all being ages!' she complained to Brax. 'This whole place is barely the size of a football pitch; they must have been able to search it by now!'

'A slight exaggeration,' said Brax. 'I'm sure they'll let us know the instant they find something.'

And at that moment, Adrian Wall walked through the door.

Benny was completely unable to read his expression, because as far as she could tell he looked grumpy even when he was completely over the moon. 'Adrian?' she called.

He shot her a look, and turned to Brax. 'Nothing, Mr Braxiatel,' he said. 'We've looked all over the place. The boys are still going, but I think it's gonna be a long term thing.'

Benny moaned in frustration. Brax gave her a reassuring look, and moved over to the vid-phone. 'Ms Jones?' he said, having reached her. 'Any luck so far?'

But there wasn't.

'I think you're just going to have to get used to those "man-bits",' smiled Avril. 'It's not so bad, believe me. I spent some time in the body of an elderly priest, once. I rather enjoyed it.'

Adrian was looking extremely confused, and not, as far as Benny could tell, very happy. Benny saw him half take something small and sparkling out of his pocket, glance down, and then put it back in his pocket again. She wondered what that was all about.

Brax opened his mouth. 'Adrian. Perhaps I should explain...'

But just then the cat flap flipped forward, hitting Adrian Wall on the calf and taking away his attention. Wolsey sauntered in, unaware, a large red and white fish clamped between his jaws.

'Wolsey!' Benny cried, running over to him. 'What have I told you? That poor little fish! Put it down this instant!'

Wolsey ignored her, wandering off into a corner and beginning to gnaw on his acquisition. 'Hmm. He obviously *was* hungry...' Brax murmured.

'Brax, I'm so sorry,' Benny said. 'That's one of your Dyamon Daggers from the lake, isn't it? I don't know what's got into Wolsey, he's never done that before. He dips a paw in the water and plays with them a

bit, but he never does anything more than that. He doesn't like the water, for a start!

'So what made him dive in and get a fish?' Brax asked.

'I have no idea. Hang on though...' Benny hurried over to Wolsey, and ran a hand down his back. 'He's not wet...'

'I think we should go and have a look at the ornamental lake,' said Brax.

And Benny looked at the furious expression on Avril's face, and agreed that was a very good idea.

Brax told Adrian to keep an eye on Avril, Dominic and Poppy.

Adrian tried to argue. Brax told him briefly that the person who looked like Bernice was actually an ancient sorceress, the person who was actually Benny was this rather handsome young man, and that he would leave Avril to explain it all, and then he and Benny left. Hurriedly.

'You knew it was me all along, didn't you?' Benny said to Brax as they jogged down to the ornamental lake. 'Why did you put us through all that test rigmarole?'

'Oh, I thought it was fun,' smiled Brax.

It was very lucky for him that they reached the lake at that moment, and Benny was distracted.

It was quite a disturbing sight. Brax's precious Dyamon dagger-fish were floating on the lake's surface, bumping against its grassy edges. 'Wolsey must have thought all his Christmases had come at once,' Benny said. 'You know, I saw Avril in here.' She didn't mention the presence of Adrian Wall.

'She must have dropped the crystal to the bottom of the lake. Not the first place you'd think of looking. Still, at least it's solved the aeons long question of whether or not fish have consciousnesses.'

'Though quite how we're going to persuade the mind of a fish to return to its body...' said Brax. 'And quite how we're going to get the crystal out...?'

'I can take a hint,' said Benny. She began to peel off her clothes. 'I just hope this body can swim.' And she jumped in.

The water was warm, but she shivered as she kicked her way through the smooth-scaled bodies of the mindless fish. The water was clear, and Benny sent thoughts of thanks towards Brax and his insistence on immaculate grounds-keeping as she ducked her head under.

She knew she was in the right place the moment her head was submerged: she'd felt the pull of the crystal enough times by now. Steeling her mind against it, she swam towards the call, Dominic's body obeying her every command with ease and his honed muscles pushing her powerfully forward.

She was getting deep enough now that the sunlight was finding it harder to penetrate the water, but she could see the crystal. The lake was artificial, its bottom covered in silvery gravel, and the crystal was half-buried there, taking the tiny shards of sunlight and turning them into a blue-white blaze.

Benny reached out for it. She'd forgotten how beautiful the crystals were. Truly awe-inspiring. She could gaze at it for ever...

16

Soul-Destroying

Benny's head broke the surface and she gulped in air, narrowly avoiding breathing in a fish. She looked around, dazed, beginning to kick her legs automatically. She felt hands let go of her, and she turned round – to see the last sight she had ever expected to see: the always impeccably elegant Irving Braxiatel treading water fully dressed beside her.

'I must apologise, Benny,' he said, between deep breaths of his own. 'After all I had heard, I should never have let you go down there.'

'The crystal?' Benny gasped.

'I have it,' Brax replied. He began to swim towards the lake-edge. 'Come on, back to dry land.'

It didn't take many strokes for Benny to reach the shallows, where her feet touched the bottom and she could walk the rest of the way. Brax climbed out first, and put out a hand to help her up, which she gratefully accepted. It briefly crossed her mind how odd that would look to an observer: the stately older man assisting the muscled young buck.

'Take a rest,' Brax said, 'get your breath back.'

But she staggered to her feet. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'And we've got the crystal. Could we just get this over with?'

Even by Adrian Wall standards, he was looking exceptionally peeved when Benny and Brax entered the study. He appeared to have tied Dominic and Poppy to the love seat, and both his and Avril's faces bore the expressions of persons who have just had a flaming row.

'Had a nice time while we were away?' Benny asked cheerfully, plonking the crystal down on her desk. Avril's face did not get any happier.

'Please don't scowl like that,' Benny said. 'You'll give me frown-lines. I'll have to smother my face in vanishing cream when I get it back in a minute.'

'You couldn't possibly understand,' Avril whispered, standing up from the sofa. 'I should have destroyed that one too, when I had the chance.'

'Ha! There is no way you're getting your hands on it now,'

Benny said. 'Or should I say, no way you're getting *my* hands on it. Because I am, of course, going to resume possession of them any moment now. Brax? Can we get on with this please?'

He's going to do himself an injury soon.' She was indicating

Dominic, who was straining at his bonds trying to reach the crystal.

‘I think there’s something you’ve not considered, Benny,’

Brax murmured, steering her to one side – although, Benny noted, taking care not to leave anyone else a clear run at the crystal.

‘Mm-hmm?’ she said unenthusiastically, because to be perfectly honest there could be a billion and one things she hadn’t considered but all she cared about at the moment was that she was potentially seconds away from not having a penis any more.

‘How many –’ Brax began, but there was a noise from behind and Benny instinctively jumped to the desk and grabbed the crystal, just in case.

The noise had come from Avril. She hadn’t tried to get at the crystal, though, she had darted into Benny’s bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Benny grabbed the crystal off the desk for safety, and followed. It took her a few goes to open the door, as Avril had obviously shoved something in front of it (it turned out to be an armchair), but eventually she got in.

She stared around in amazement. Avril was nowhere to be seen. ‘Brax!’ she called.

He joined her momentarily, followed by Adrian Wall. ‘She’s gone!’ Benny told them. ‘Avril’s gone! The window’s closed, there was no time...’

Brax walked past Benny, into the room and across to the other side. He carefully opened the wardrobe door. Inside, crouched in the corner and partially obscured by coats, was Avril.

‘Ha!’ cried Benny. ‘It’ll take more than that to hide from me. You are giving me my body back or...’

And then she noticed that the evil witch was crying. Adrian pushed his way past Benny and went over to the wardrobe.

‘Leave this to me,’ he growled.

Adrian approached Avril carefully, as if she were a potentially violent dog. She was huddled up, head bowed to her knees, shivering.

‘What’s the matter?’ Adrian said softly, still behaving as if she were an animal – or a child.

Benny thought she heard a whisper in return, and moved closer. Brax was beside her.

‘I can’t,’ Avril was saying. ‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.’

Adrian sounded puzzled. ‘What can’t you do? Tell me.’

Avril raised haunted eyes to him. ‘I can’t go back to how I was before. I can’t stay there forever, never being able to move, or feel, or speak.’ She almost howled: ‘I couldn’t even cry!’

Adrian had hold of her arm and was guiding her out of the wardrobe. ‘No one’s making you do that,’ he said, glaring at Benny and Brax. ‘Are they?’

‘Ah, well,’ said Benny, ‘It’s all a question of maths, you see. Not enough bodies to go round.’

‘Three of you, three bodies,’ said Adrian. ‘Seems simple to me.’

‘You’re forgetting someone,’ said Benny. ‘Bill.’

‘Ah,’ said Brax. ‘You had considered that after all. I’m glad – though I think –’

‘Who is “Bill”?’ scowled Adrian, intimating facially that there’d better be a damn good answer to that question.

‘See that tubby balding guy you tied to a chair?’ said Benny.

‘Him.’

‘I think it’s all right, Benny,’ said Brax, placatingly. ‘You don’t need to worry about Bill.’

‘Oh no,’ she replied, ‘of course not. I was forgetting. He wasn’t anyone important, he was just a guard. It’s okay to kill off guards; I mean, it wouldn’t have been a proper adventure without it. Only charismatic murderers like Dominic and Avril count, and we go about saying that we won’t hurt them because it’d make us as bad as they are, all the time being perfectly happy to ignore the fate of poor little nonentities like Bill, who serve their purpose and then don’t matter any more.’

Well, I’d expected more from you, Brax, that’s all I can say, and I expect you could come up with dozens of answers that would prove me to be a hypocrite but then I am only human and not as so-called perfect as you in your little Bill-ignoring world.’ She paused for breath. ‘And it’s not fair,’ she concluded.

Brax looked at her for a few seconds, quite seriously.

‘And don’t laugh at me!’ she cried.

He shook his head. ‘I wasn’t laughing at you at all.’ He took her hand and sat her down on the bed.

‘Don’t think you can get round me by being nice,’ Benny told him. ‘I’m not prepared to be shaken on this. I’m President of the Save Bill Society, and that’s all there is to it.’

‘Benny,’ Brax said, very, very gently, ‘I was trying to talk to you about this before. You see, I don’t think there is a Bill any more. No –’ he hushed her as she began to protest – ‘I’m not being callous, and we will check. But remember your explanation of how you survived in your disembodied state: it took great force of will –’

‘I don’t think I actually put it quite like that,’ said Benny, ‘but thank you.’

‘– and also a good deal of luck: being able to survive until you came into the close proximity of more of the crystals. I admit to not knowing the mental acuity of “Bill”, but I fear that as he did not have the luck element, he will have long-since perished.’

‘Oh,’ said Benny. ‘So it is a happy ending all round, for everyone

gathered here at least. I'm sure Bill will be pleased that he didn't die in vain.'

'Benny!' Brax spoke quite sharply. 'I assure you that if "Bill" is still with us we will make alternative arrangements. Can you find out for us?'

She screwed up her forehead, puzzled for a moment. 'What, get out my ouija board or something?' Then she realised. 'You want me to pop into the crystal and check?'

'If you are able to do that, yes.'

She took a deep breath. 'Okay. As President of the Save Bill Society I suppose I must. But you have to keep a serious eye on this body. If it starts going "glub glub glub" you'll know it's been taken over by the consciousness of a dagger-fish.'

Brax nodded. 'I shall take especial care to watch out for that.'

Benny got the crystal out of her pocket. She heard a gasp in her own voice, and turned to see Adrian Wall restraining Avril who appeared to be getting quite hysterical. Weirdly, it didn't seem odd anymore. She wasn't seeing Adrian and Benny; it was just Adrian and a woman. The human mind. It could get used to anything, given time.

And she could already feel the crystal's pull.

And then she was inside it.

It was the calmest she'd felt for days. The relief... oh, she couldn't describe it. None of it mattered any more. It didn't matter what body she had. It didn't matter what had happened to Bill. It didn't matter if she never saw Brax or Wolsey or Jason again. Jason! She could think of him without a twinge. So, he was in some other dimension. So what? That's where he was and this was where she was, and none of it mattered at all. She had some vague recollections of having chased all over the galaxy trying to track him down. She couldn't for the life of her think why. All she needed was here in the crystal. She was just going to sleep in the crystal; to relax and not worry about any of that stuff ever again. It was like lying in a huge, sunlit field with the light warming her eyelids – utterly peaceful, utterly calm, no one else about for miles. Just beautiful. She could just drift away...

'Benny!'

A voice from the outside. An evil voice, disturbing her peacefulness.

'Benny!'

She became aware again. And felt really cross about it.

'Benny! You have to come back. You have to come back to us. It's important.'

But it wasn't. And she didn't want to.

Then something whizzed past her. A person? Bill? No...

She could hear outside things again.

'Benny? Thank goodness, for a moment I was worried we had lost

you too. I couldn't have forgiven myself... What are you doing?"

And now Benny was conscious of another void, but one that felt so right, so familiar... and almost without thinking she drifted over to it and filled it to the very brim.

She shook her head. A strong hand clasped her arm reassuringly, and she turned and saw... the craggy vulpine face of Adrian Wall.

Benny was back in her own body. And she could see the body of Dominic standing up, raising the crystal over its head...

'Aaaargh!' she yelled, scrambling off the floor and diving into a rugby tackle all in one movement. Dominic fell backwards on to the bed, the crystal bouncing harmlessly on to the bedside rug.

Adrian Wall had grabbed her by this time. 'What the hell -?'

'I'm me!' Benny gabbled, 'Me again! This is Benny!'

'You said that before,' Adrian growled.

'Yes, but this time it really is me saying it's me! That's Avril there!' She nodded her head at Dominic's body, being unable to point due to Adrian's firm grip.

Brax had picked up the crystal and moved away from the bed. 'I think that is Benny, and she's telling the truth,' he said reassuringly to Adrian. 'You can let her go. I was stupid, so stupid,' Benny heard him muttering to himself, 'to allow the use of a crystal with the Crystal Sorceress in the room. She could use it. She'd want to destroy it. I should have thought...'

Benny shrugged off Adrian Wall's loosened grip and brushed herself down. The wardrobe door was still open, and she took a long look in the full-length mirror on the inside.

A woman looked back at her. A scruffy, tired-looking woman in her thirties, dressed in a shabby old blue dressing gown; with no breasts to speak of, a bit of a turn, stubbly legs and lines around her weary eyes.

Benny thought the woman in the glass was the most beautiful person she'd ever seen.

She was home. How could she ever have doubted that this was where she wanted to be – where she belonged? Everything was going to be all right now.

And then the bedroom door opened, and Dominic and Avril walked in. Dominic was holding a knife – Benny recognised it as her favourite wooden-handled bread knife, and her first cry was 'That's my best knife!' which sounded a bit ridiculous alongside Brax's calming words: 'Don't do anything stupid, please.'

Benny was probably the only one who then heard him say, under his breath: 'Two experienced criminals left in a room by themselves. I am losing my grip.'

'They were tied up,' she whispered back at him, trying to be

reassuring.

‘Please give me the crystal,’ said Dominic. Now, even in his balding “Bill” body, Benny could hear the power in his voice that reminded her how attractive he had been.

‘I don’t think there’s any need for anyone to get hurt,’ said Brax, still the peace-maker. ‘No one is objecting to you getting your body back.’ He shot a look at Benny, who shook her head.

There had been no Bill in the crystal. Then he turned to Avril, still lying on the bed.

She sat up. ‘I don’t care,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t care what body I have as long as I have one. As long as no one ever puts me back in that crystal again.’

Dominic-Bill smiled, the knife still pointed at Brax but his eyes flickering steadily around everyone in the room. He knew what he was doing, thought Benny. She wasn’t going to risk jumping him.

‘Not going back in the crystal...’

Dominic’s smile became broader. ‘You won’t have to. You won’t have the chance. We’ve been making plans for that crystal. The potential of that thing – it’s more than you could imagine. And it won’t matter who you tell about me, because with my looks and that crystal, I can achieve anything.’

‘I believe you,’ said Brax. ‘Please lower the knife. I am going to hand you the crystal now. None of us want to get hurt.’

Benny tried to protest, but he’d turned his back on her to look at Avril. ‘Avril here is perfectly willing to swap bodies with you.’

Brax walked forward slowly, and gave the crystal to Dominic.

Hang on a minute, Benny thought – and then smiled.

Dominic wasn’t quite as clever as he thought.

‘Her first,’ Dominic said, gesturing at Avril with the knife.

There was barely an intake of breath from Avril, and Benny could tell instantly that she had gone, into the crystal. Dominic handed the knife to Poppy, and stared into the crystal himself.

Life left “Bill’s” eyes only for a moment before it returned.

Dominic was standing up from the bed. ‘Oh thank you, thank you!’ he cried, his hands cradling his face, which held an expression of such ecstasy that Benny involuntarily took a step back – unfortunately treading on Adrian Wall’s toes.

Dominic didn’t seem to have realised yet that he didn’t have the crystal any more.

Poppy was quicker. ‘Give that to me!’ she yelled, brandishing the knife at Bill – now Avril.

Avril beamed exultantly. ‘Shan’t!’

And she smashed the crystal on to the floor.

The crystal shattered into a million shards of light. Poppy screamed

with rage, dropping the knife. And then Dominic joined in the scream, but his cry was of pain and horror. As Poppy's scream died away, they all turned to Dominic. He barely sounded human, such was the pain in his voice.

For a few fractions of a second, Benny couldn't see how he was hurt. There was no blood, no marks... but then she saw it: the tiniest iridescent blemish on his cheek – a sliver of crystal piercing the smooth, perfect skin.

His distress pierced even Benny's heart. 'It'll be all right,' she said, moving towards him, and Poppy was already there, reaching a hand out towards his face...

'No!' Brax put out a hand to stop them both. 'Let me look.'

As was always the case with Brax, everyone deferred to his authority – even Poppy.

Dominic had stopped screaming now, but his eyes were full of despair. 'Help me,' he breathed.

Benny watched as Irving Braxiatel carefully examined the face of this mass-murderer, with every indication of concern.

It was a few moments before he spoke. 'The shard must not be removed; not by any of us. It seems to have entered the bone, and is quite firmly held in place. If it is carelessly removed, not only will the wound bleed and the inevitable scars be greater, but there is a risk of damaging facial nerves. However if it is not removed soon, even the slightest movement could cause such injuries anyway.'

'Just from a tiny piece of crystal?' Poppy gasped.

'Yes,' Brax answered, matter-of-factly. 'It might also then work its way into the brain. The consequences could be extremely severe.'

Dominic didn't seem to have taken it all in. 'Scars?' he was whispering.

'The wound is very deep,' Brax said, 'but tiny. The scar will be infinitesimal. A good reconstructive surgeon would be able to cover up the damage.'

'Do they have good reconstructive surgeons in prison?'

Benny asked brightly.

'But I'll know,' Dominic was murmuring. 'I'll know. I won't be perfect any more.'

'Look on the bright side,' said Benny. 'Maybe when the icy shard is removed your heart will suddenly be warm again and you'll be a good person. Oh no, sorry, wrong story. That probably won't happen.'

Poppy had taken hold of Dominic's arm, and was trying to lead the dazed man away. He began to follow her, walking like a zombie. No one tried to stop them.

But as they turned, Dominic came face to face with the full-length mirror on the inside wardrobe door, and froze.

One hand came up to his cheek.

‘Be careful!’ Brax admonished him, but it was unlikely that Dominic heard.

Dominic lowered the hand. And smashed it into the mirror.

And as the mirror shattered, so did the man. He fell to his knees amidst the broken glass, and now Poppy was screaming again.

‘Your hand!’ she was yelling, ‘your beautiful hand!’

Benny looked. The china-white skin of Dominic’s right hand was covered in crimson blood. Roses in the snow.

Dominic looked up at Poppy, and smiled. ‘It doesn’t matter any more,’ he said. And closed his eyes.

Chevy and Rix had wanted to take Dominic, Poppy and “Bill” back to Hera to stand trial for the murder of Arsine De Vallen.

‘There’s no point,’ Benny had told them. ‘None of them did it. De Vallen committed suicide. It’s too complicated to explain why, though.’

They didn’t believe her – unsurprisingly – so Benny finally agreed to take a lie-detector test. The results obviously confused the guards terribly – it wasn’t as if Benny had even been on Hera at the time! – but they finally had to accept them.

‘You didn’t have to put yourself through all that,’ Brax said to her later.

‘I felt like I did,’ she said, unable to explain it fully even to herself. ‘It’s just... well, it was the truth. Of all the many terrible things they did, that wasn’t one of them. Oh, it would have been convenient enough to send the three of them off to prison, but it would have been... petty.’

‘Even as President of the Save Bill Society?’

She frowned at him. ‘That’s not worthy of you, Brax.’

‘I know. I apologise.’

‘I said I could be accused of hypocrisy sometimes. I guess this is just one of those times. But the thing is, they’re all suffering enough in their various ways, and they’re going to be punished for crimes they did commit. I could have gone for revenge after what they did to me in the first place – but I’ve taken that path too often. I don’t want to be a person ruled by vengeance, and I’ve come close to it so many times. So I’ve done it for me, not them.’

‘I see,’ said Brax. ‘I think, sometimes, you underestimate yourself, Bernice.’

He didn’t explain what he meant. And she didn’t ask.

Brax had arranged for Avril to move back into the cave under the planetoid’s surface, once he had arranged for new surveys to assess its structural stability. Adrian Wall had had to rearrange the building

work to accommodate this, which hadn't gone down very well. Adrian was avoiding both Benny and "Bill" at the moment.

Benny had questioned the wisdom of letting a centuries-old evil sorceress and diary-destroyer live inside the Braxiatel Collection. Actually, she'd shouted at Brax quite a lot.

'Do some reading,' he said, pushing a sheaf of papers towards her. 'The translation was quite crude, but... "someone's" been through and tidied it up a bit. I think you can work out who. And I think you'll understand things a bit more then.'

Benny had read them, and was not convinced. 'People can lie when they write, Brax,' she'd whispered to herself. 'You demonstrated that with your Benny Quiz. And anyone who can destroy a diary is no respecter of the form. They would feel no need to tell the truth.' She shivered. 'I really don't like this,' she told Wolsey.

They said I abandoned Cherry, and left her to her fate.

They were telling the truth. And I'll never forgive myself for what happened.

I was so young, and so naive; and I loved my knight with every fibre of my being. We were out to destroy some creatures that slaughtered the inhabitants of a small village, it had taken us days to get there; and one of the monsters had killed our beasts when we arrived. We tracked it down – but eventually found ourselves deep within the creatures' lair, in places where no person had ever been. I think the creature had lured us down there, knowing that we would put up more of a fight than the villagers and wanting its friends to hand. And then we felt the call of the crystals... Cherry was stronger than me, she resisted. I... I was weak, and I followed the call. The troll-things must have been used to the crystals, immune. Cherry began to fight them off. I couldn't. I was hypnotised. There had been hundreds of tiny skeletons outside the cavern; I think the creatures used the crystals to catch their prey though they weren't particularly intelligent – but all I could do was stare at the iridescence surrounding me, which meant that I was their prey too. And suddenly I found myself within the shining wall looking out. It was a beautiful feeling: complete peace and utter freedom.

I would have stayed there for ever, but I heard Cherry screaming. The woman I loved was dying, and I had to help her!

I forced myself out of the crystals, back into my body. They didn't want to let me go, but Cherry's screams were piercing my mind and they made me strong.

By the time I found her again, she was dead. There was nothing I could do for her, nothing at all, and the creatures were going to kill me too. I almost didn't care. Without Cherry... how would my life be worth living? But then I thought of her sister, and the others who loved her, and how

they'd spend an eternity waiting for her to come back and never knowing, and I knew I had to get out and tell them what had happened, and how she had died bravely. But Cherry was so much stronger than me, so much greater a fighter – how could I defeat the monsters if she hadn't been able to? I could take one of them, maybe, but there were many...

I realised that I had to find – another way out. One that didn't involve fighting.

That was the first time I thought of using the crystal. I had seen that the creatures didn't like coming too close to the crystals; they were staying outside. Maybe they weren't fully immune. So I ran back into the Crystal Cavern, using the thought of Cherry to sustain me against the pull. One of the creatures, braver than the rest, followed me – and I hit him hard. Then... well, it was a risk, but I was going to die anyway. I let the crystals take me.

I wanted to stay there. The grief was much less in the crystals. I could have been happy there. But it wouldn't have been real.

I could see my body lying by that of the troll. I had to do it now, before its friends came to investigate. I plucked a crystal from the wall, and concentrated. I pushed my mind to the monster, and forced its own out. I was in its body.

Awakening in that monstrous form was the strangest experience of my life. But the really strange thing was, I didn't mind. Perhaps because my mind was overloaded with so many emotions, there wasn't room for any more... I could stand in this new body, and I found I had such incredible strength – I pitied the poor weak human form lying on the ground in front of me. But I used my new muscle to pick up that puny body and the crystal it was holding, and then I went out to where Cherry lay. The other creatures were confused, and spoke to me – and I found I could understand their voices. I told them to stay away from me, and I picked up Cherry too. Then I carried us both out, my knight and I. The monsters didn't follow us.

When I was free of the caves, I used the crystal to reclaim my own form. The troll didn't take its body back, I suppose with its limited intelligence it was still stuck inside the cavern.

I carried my beloved knight back to our camp. The only settlement nearby was the ghost town of the slaughtered village.

I was all alone, and without our beasts I could not carry Cherry far.

I had to leave her there, and carry on alone.

After a few days, I realised it was hopeless. My legs had been badly bruised as I dragged myself out of the caves, and I couldn't walk for long at a time. I was having problems hunting for food, and water was scarce. I was still a day's walk from civilisation when I finally collapsed. And, even knowing that I was going to die, the worst thing was that Cherry's family would never know what had happened to her. It made me think of how I had felt back in the cavern, and I knew I had to risk using the crystal

again.

I sent my mind into it. But what to do then? I found that I didn't have to stay in the crystal – and I went searching for help. My mind could travel much faster than my body, and I soon found people. I tried to communicate but that didn't work. I was going to have to use someone else's body. I couldn't get into the mind of a waking person, not then, so I took over the form of a sleeping woman. I alerted the village, and sent them out to rescue me. And when they'd brought me back, I took my own body again.

And that was the first time I was called a witch.

They summoned the Knight Elders. I was dragged away in disgrace. I tried to explain about Cherry, but no one would listen to me. All they could take in was that my knight was dead and I wasn't. Cherry's squire, who should have given her life before allowing a hair on her knight's head to be harmed. I had deserted my knight, betrayed the Order, and an entire village swore I had bewitched them.

The Elders sentenced me to death. They so convinced me of my shame and guilt that I accepted the verdict. But as my head lay on the block... I realised that Cherry's family would never know the truth. And I realised that in condemning me, the Order of Rowan had proved itself to be intolerant and brutal. Cherry had given her life for the Rowan, and it was a lie!

The crystal was with me. I sent my mind into it. And the force of my anger was so great that I was able to push out the mind of my executioner. I knew I had to expose the Rowan, but for now they had to believe I was dead. So I brought the sword down on my own neck. I saw light coming into my own eyes as the blade flashed, and I think the executioner had found herself a new form for those few brief seconds. I felt no pity for her. She was part of an evil that I was now pledged to destroy...

More pages follow. A pink Post-it note is stuck at the very end:

I exiled myself, and gave up form. But now I have a body again. I won't lose it this time. I can't. Perhaps this time I can show people that I am not evil. Perhaps this time I can make my peace with my lost love. Perhaps this time I can make things better.

Yellow Post-it note stuck half over the pink Post-it note (with different handwriting):

What utter bollocks.

'So, no more crystals,' Brax said, that evening, as they were taking a walk by the lake. 'You're sure of that?'

'Well, how can I be certain?' said Benny. 'But I can't see how there

could be. Avril smashed the first crystal, the one I took was destroyed in the shuttle crash and you've just seen what happened to the third... and the whole cavern was shot to bits.'

'And are you sure of *that*?'

'Yes. Well, no. But no one knows where that is except me and those three – and I'm almost certain I could never find it again, and Dominic's lost it completely and Poppy should be locked up by now, and Avril's – well, you know about her –' she frowned at Brax, then – 'and it's miles from anywhere and guarded by all sorts of traps and no one found it in a thousand years and it's almost certainly destroyed anyway, so...' She shrugged, and threw a handful of fish pellets to Brax's new Dyamon Daggers.

'Very well,' said Brax. 'I'll trust your judgement. After all, if anyone knows the risks involved with these crystals, it's you.'

'Yes,' said Benny, 'it most certainly is. Don't worry, I'm absolutely certain that there are no more crystals in the universe. I wouldn't want anything like this to happen ever ag– *Wolsey!*'

She hurried over to pick up her cat, who was trying to reach a Dyamon Dagger with his paw. 'See what's happened, he's got a taste for it now! Bad Wolsey! You are not to eat these fishes!'

'He's doing what comes naturally, Benny. Everyone does. Don't worry about it. Now, I think we need to have a little talk about Adrian...'

'Oh, bother Adrian,' said Benny, exasperatedly. Then she capitulated. 'Yes, I suppose we do...'

They walked off into the sunset together, discussing what in the name of goodness they could do to help the hideously embarrassed and lovesick Killoran. But halfway across Brax got called away by Ms Jones to do something she thought was very important although no doubt it wasn't really, and they never finished the conversation.

Keeping Body and Soul Together

The boy was young and beautiful, and poor. His name was Elisha, and he made a living – barely enough to keep body and soul together – from hustling tourists at the Syal spaceport bars.

He spotted the mark as soon as he went in that day. Old guy, sitting at the counter, downing shots so fast they wouldn't have time to touch the sides. Drowning his sorrows maybe, but he could afford to – top-quality tailoring, gold watch-chain peeping out of the top pocket, peeling bills off a roll of cash to get another shot. A perfect candidate for some Elisha-comfort.

Elisha went over; sat on the stool next to the old man; smiled at him with that so-sweet innocent smile. 'Um, hi,' he said, mock-shyly.

The old foggy shot him a terrifyingly intense look, and pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. Oh shit, was he going to turn out to be a religious nut or something, going to try to save Elisha's soul? Had he completely misread the situation?

The guy reached out a trembling, wrinkled old hand, and put it on Elisha's knee. 'You look thirsty,' he said. 'You want a drink?'

'Er, yeah,' Elisha said. 'That'd be great. Thanks.'

The old man called for another couple of shots, and then led the boy to a private booth. Maybe it was gonna be okay after all. 'Just want to make sure I've got the message right,' the old codger said when they were seated. 'You need to make money, but can't make it legit. So you turn tricks, pick pockets, do anything that your youth and agility will allow. You're worried what might happen when you're too old to make it, but the way your life's going you reckon you won't make it that far anyway. Am I right?'

Elisha sighed inwardly. He'd made a mistake. Better get out of there. 'Look, old man, no offence, but I don't believe in no gods and I'm not going to start now. So if you want to save souls, find some other sucker.'

The man shook his head sadly. 'It's *your* soul I'm interested in. And I'm going to save it, whether you like it or not. Look, what would you say to a job that paid a thousand dollars?'

The boy boggled at him. 'You're offering me a thousand bucks?'

'Just tell me what you'd say. It's genuine, I assure you.' He put the piece of paper he was carrying on to the table in front of them, and smoothed it out. Elisha read: 'HUMAN/HUMANOID. UNDER 25S (HUMAN) OR EQUIVALENT URGENTLY REQUIRED. GUARANTEED MINIMUM PAYMENT \$1000. NO RISK. APPLY P/H 4762.'

‘And you’re telling me this is genuine? Real? Legit?’

‘All of those things, yes.’

Elisha beamed at the old man. ‘Thank you! Thank you so much! You don’t know what this means to me, mister!’

‘You’d accept the offer? You’d sign up?’

‘Too right! I’ll call right now! A thousand bucks? That’d change my life!’ He made to get up.

The old man put out a hand to restrain him. ‘Just a moment, please.’

Elisha was still smiling as he sat back down. ‘Yeah, sure, whatever.’

‘You think it’d change your life?’

‘Well, yeah! Look at me!’

The guy shook his head. ‘That’s what I thought, too.’

Elisha frowned slightly. ‘What? Sorry, I don’t get it.’

‘I’m not showing you this advert so you can apply. I’m showing it to you because if I don’t, someday soon someone else might. And now I know that you would accept the offer. Just like I did.’

Elisha was backing off a bit now. Maybe this guy was a nutter after all... ‘Don’t get what you’re saying, granddad. Doesn’t look to me like you’d fit the job requirements.’

‘Oh no?’ The old guy stared Elisha straight in the eye.

‘Strange that you think that. After all, I’m younger than you are.’

Elisha got up at that, but the man pulled him back down.

‘You’re going to listen to me. You see I am going to save your soul, whether you like it or not. I am twenty-two years old, and three months ago I was just the same as you. I worked the bars on Hamabin. Then one day someone gave me this advert. It seemed the answer to all my prayers. A thousand dollars! And so I answered it, and this golden bitch calls me in and brings in some old guy to look me up and down, and finally I’m accepted. And now I’m going to tell you exactly what happened to me when I took up the offer.’

The old man spoke for about half an hour. Elisha listened as if hypnotised, shivering occasionally. Finally, the tale was finished.

‘They tried to kill you, afterwards?’

‘Yes. That was the plan. Well, it wouldn’t do for me to be wandering around, would it? The whole point was, this old guy had died, and made me his heir. He could hardly claim stuff if his old body was still alive. And there’s a whole industry there, gotta be kept a secret. But I managed to escape.’

‘It’s just... sick.’

The old man took a deep breath. ‘I know.’

‘I can’t believe it...’

The man grabbed Elisha’s shoulders and shook him hard.

‘Believe it!’ he shouted. ‘I know how it sounds. It’s rubbish. A kids’

story. A fairy tale to scare you straight. But it's also true.'

He pulled himself up, slowly. 'I've warned you now. That's what I came to do.' He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out the roll of notes and peeled off a few. 'There,' he said. 'Ten dollars. I'm sorry it's not that much. But there are a lot of boys like us – like you... and a thousand doesn't go that far. And I need enough to keep me in drink, because most of the time I'm trying to forget what I am now. How my legs don't work like they used to, and how my eyesight's gone, and how I've got wrinkles on every square inch of my body – and how I've got to keep on the move so they don't track me down and finish the job.' He shut his eyes for a second. 'But I hope it's enough to give you a start, an opportunity, a reason not to follow that advert like I did.'

And then he shuffled out of the booth, wheezing with the effort.

Elisha sat for a while, staring at the twenty half-dollar bills. It was more money than he'd seen for a heck of a long time. But then he looked at the piece of paper, still lying on the table in front of him. A thousand dollars – that'd be a hundred times this. An unbelievable amount.

And after all – body-swapping? What sort of wacko tale was that? It couldn't possibly be true. He looked at the paper again.

'NO RISK', it said.

And after all – a thousand dollars was a lot of money...

PROFESSOR BERNICE SUMMERFIELD AND THE SQUIRE'S CRYSTAL

A new novel by
JACQUELINE RAYNER

Legend tells of an evil sorceress who used the power of magical crystals to transfer her mind into the bodies of others. Her reign of terror was long and bloody, and her final defeat the cause of great rejoicing.

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Finding the last resting place of the Crystal Sorceress is an archaeological dream on a par with discovering the Holy Grail. So it's hardly likely that someone will just offer the solution to Professor Bernice Summerfield on a plate.

But sometimes the unlikely actually happens. And one thing that's very, very unlikely is that Benny will suddenly find herself to be a member of the opposite gender...



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Science Fiction

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